

The Analysis of T. S. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi" as an

Allegory

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**Abstract:**

This research centres on analysing T. S. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi" as an allegory. The research focuses on how Eliot designs his journey of faith in the form of figural allegory so as to seek the originality of his personal experience with the spiritual dimension of the poet's new commitment. The research will be divided into four sections: section one is about allegory :a historical overview, Section two will focus on Eliot as an allegorist and section three will be devoted to the analysis of the poem as an allegory. Section four will end up the research with a conclusion.

**Keywords:** allegory, journey , rebirth, Ariel Poems , Pilgrim's Progress, symbolism, biblical figure, spirituality,

**I. Allegory : Historical Overview**

Allegory is connected with far deeper beginnings of man's religious awareness and linguistic use. It was through language that his pursuit to achieve equilibrium between the inner and outer that allegory came to existence. Hence, "the origins of allegory are very ancient ... as a mode of expression ... so natural to the human mind that it is so universal. " (Cuddon, 1979:6) The universality of allegory is something inherent due to its inner-outer dichotomy.

The inherence of this mode in the way man minds the world makes it one of the archetypal modes in the human mind and experience. In this sense, Shelley (1962:228) emphasizes the susceptibility of original religions to allegory. Shelley means that allegory was an inevitable linguistic mode adopted to convey the early religious consciousness and teachings. Its inevitability is the due result of its neutrality and universality. In much the same sense C.S. Lewis (1958:44) argues that the origin of allegory is untraceable in that it is associated with man's existence and mind, and the nature of his thought and Language. So to be more specific, the spoken of religious roots of the allegorical use should be traced back to myth. Regarded as the embryonic form of the early religious thinking, myths made a great use of this artifice, and most of them turned up in the form of allegory. The reasoning myths, for instance, aimed at explaining the abstract, supernatural world and forces by attributing to these the characteristics of the human world as in the process of personifying gods and goddesses in the old times. As a result, " myth ... is to be considered as a form of allegory and an attempt at expressing universal facts and forces. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice ... is a notable example of the allegory of redemption and salvation." (Cuddon, 1979:24) Furthermore, in the remote roots of philosophy, allegory was a means of reasoning and meditation as Plato's philosophical frame of the cave theory which was put in the form of allegory and is not so far from the mythical frame.

To dig deeper and further for a clear consideration of a solid ground upon which allegory should be approached and defined, then the Middle Ages period is the best starting point. The Middle Ages registers the beginning of the learned and conscious use of allegory as the most suitable means to convey the trends and modes of thought through literature. Hence a great deal of mediaeval literature was allegorical and had a religious underlying meaning due to the allegorical way of thinking which observed the world then as "...an imperfect reflection of the divine world." (Peck & Coyle, 1984:127) In fact, allegory was a means of understanding the essence of the world via viewing it religiously. As far as the nature of allegory of Middle Ages is concerned, Stephen Medcalf proclaims that allegory was a widespread tendency aiming at introducing the Mediaeval people, events and man's precepts and the characteristics of his existence. (Medealf,1981:28)

The nature of allegory and its establishment in the literary traditions of Europe were the main focus of the European theological thought. The psychological allegory which is a representation of an inner conflict between personified virtues and vices for the possession of the soul, establishes themes which were used frequently during the Middle ages. This is clearly shown in sermon literature, homilies, and theological plays beside the themes in the morality plays. (Medealf,1981:28) Also the study of the Old Testament and the New Testament is considered as a fertile ground that yields some approaches to the study of allegory. The Biblical allegory, for instance, was adopted and adapted to bear the newly Christian view of the universe in which the external and internal worlds were expressed through the mythical allegory wherein events or characters in the Old Testament serve as types of the events or characters in the New Testament. ( Stephen Modcalf:147)

In contradiction of the theological foundation, it was supposed that the nature of allegory has derived its validity and recurrent use as a literary method from the European literatures, for instance; the Thomastic patters or theory of the four-fold allegory was adopted and considered as a poetic term by the mediaeval poet Dante whose *Divina Comedia* stands as the greatest allegory of the time. Commenting on Dante's work, T.S. Eliot (1932:243.)states that :” it (allegory) was not a device to enable the uninspired to write verses but really a mental habit which when raised to the point of genius which can make a great poet as well as a great mystic or saint.” The allegory artifice has been adopted and adapted by various writers and poets who were involved whether consciously or not in expressing their religious and semi-religious and even their secular themes through the mask of allegory. But allegory, as a way of thinking and perceiving life spiritually, was ceased to be so since man stopped minding the world and experiencing it religiously. Thus It became merely a literary method or a mode that writers employ in their works. (Peck & Coyle, 1984 :127)

### II. T.S. Eliot as an Allegorist

To start first with allegory as a term, it is derived from “ the Greek (*Allegora*) which means a story in verse or prose with a primary or surface meaning and a secondary or under the surface meaning.” (Cuddon, 1979 :24) In his distinction between true and false allegory, William Blake states that allegory is “a system of symbols which represents events in the spiritual world.(Quoted by Bowra, 1950:33) But Blake's mystic allegory was not limited to the traditional meaning of allegory in that it widens the scope of the allegorical scheme to cover not only the Christian view of the universe, but also the whole spiritual experiences. Recently, In his discussion of allegory, Northrop Frye (1964:90) talks about “actual allegory” or “continuous allegory” as distinguished from “ naive allegory”. Thus he explains there could be actual allegory when “...a poet explicitly indicates the relationship of his images to examples and precepts, and soirees to indicate how commentary on him should proceed. A writer is being allegorical whenever it is clear that he is saying: by this I also means that’ so if this seems to be done continuously then we may say that this writing is an allegory. Allegory covers a wide range of functions which vary according to themes and purposes which the allegory is meant to convey.

Beside the religious bearings which are so long established and known in Eliot's poetry, in his *Ariel Poems*, Eliot's experiences were being much more depersonalized as they seek direct access to the Biblical and, to some extent, literary correlative experiences, events and characters. He achieved that through both form and content which marks Eliot's shift from symbolism to allegorization in the period of his poetic creation. Eliot's experiences with the Biblical literature, which had for long time been assimilated in Eliot's poetry, now retain their suggestiveness in both form and content. Formalistically speaking, Martin Scofield (1988:145) claims that *Ariel Poems* present a change in the style and versification; they are more prosaic, reminding of the Biblical pantry in their rhythms, beside their being less symbolist than Eliot's previous poems. This tendency towards reconsidering Eliot's works is due to the parallelism between form and content which formalistic criticism tends to devote. It is worth noticing that Eliot, who is the adherent of the literary and religious European traditions, is found to be deriving his subjects and experiences very indulgently in this phase of his poetry. Yet, he extends these themes in his poetic creation to initiate an expression to the new areas of experience so as to continue something that is already existed.

Eliot's new orientation in handling already existed themes is also due to the poet's intellectual conversion to the Anglican church in June, 1927. Ariel Poems which were written then mark this shift artistically and poetically. (Scofield, 1988:145) His religious conversion necessitates Eliot's straightforward treatment of the Christian themes with the least poetic measure, but retaining a high Christian spirit. The formalist and thematic change in Eliot's poetry indicates his shift from symbolism to allegorization; from the analytical treatment of defragmented Biblical symbols, as a part of the general poetic process, to the unitary and referential handling of those themes and symbols. This transposition of the symbols from the heathen ground to the Christian soil was presupposed by Eliot's conversion which entails a change in his symbolic system. This is also going along with Renal Hargrove's argument, according to her, T.S. Eliot's middle poetry initiates a new way towards renewal and rebirth and the new orientation in choosing contents that show the change in symbolism towards the unitary function of allegory. (Hargrove, 1986:89)

Recalling Blake's definition of allegory as being a system of symbols which presents events in a spiritual world will provide a better understanding of Eliot's handling of the Christian and spiritual themes to create his own symbolic system which mark his highly appreciated poetic creation and intellectual development. Also to quote Scofield (1988:146) "Ariel poems are a sense excursion and experiments in expressing a new state of mind.", the apocalyptic nature of Eliot's experience will be much understandable as it will promote the poet who has been working so far under the influence of the Christian traditions towards his symbolic system in order to convey this new experience.

As far as the poet's religious and intellectual conversion are concerned, the poet's being in rapport with his new Christian doctrine may pace upon a solid ground with Frye's emphasis on the urgent and firm connection between the images and the precepts and the artistic sustained process of the allegorical presentation. His connection is also hinted at in Eliot's essay of 1929, "Second Thoughts about Humanism", in which he refers to his shifting away from the symbolical use to the somehow strict allegorical use.

### III. The Analysis of "Journey of the Magi" as an Allegory:

#### III. i An Introduction:

The allegory of journey is implied in most of Eliot's poetry, for instance; Prufrock's social journey, Grunion's historical journey, and the modern journey in "the Waste Land". The allegory of journey, however, is not exclusive to Eliot's poetry, but it is something prevalent in the world literature over centuries. That is why the theme of journey is granted an archetypal dimension in the human, artistic experience. As for Eliot's Journey of the Magi, it responds to the artifice of allegorical journey, and to the original faith journey as well. By allegorizing in this very phase of his poetic creation, Eliot peeks the originality of the personal experience lived. According to Paul De Man (1984:190), "the most original and profound moments in the work (are) when an authentic voice becomes audible in its authentically temporal predicament, (displaying) allegorical tendencies." Hence as an attempt at making his voice audible in this transitory period of his life, Eliot, in the Journey of the Magi, shows these allegorical tendencies. This is achieved through the religious or traditional allegory so long established in the Biblical and religious Literature in general, and, moreover, through Eliot's attempt at creating his situational allegory. Yet, allegory, in both the former and later sense, is associated with the spiritual dimension of the poet's new commitment. The Magi is firmly connected with the poet's own conversion. Among Ariel Poems this poem shows clearly this spiritual concern artistically considered. Quoting F.B. Pinion (1959:36) at length will clarify this point; "(Eliot) commitment was an act of faith implies uncertainty to this extent he remained agnostic. His subsequent poetry emphasizes almost insuperable difficulty of attaining a sense of unity with God, that intersection of the timeless with time which he calls incarnation."

T.S. Eliot is prettily knowledgeable about the bangs and suffering that accompany such spiritual journeys. However, some critics see that this poem depicts an experience which is universal and applicable to everyone making a similar journey. Moreover, the journey is not merely a historical event, but it is, as far as William Blake's definition of the term 'journey' is concerned, a spiritual event which marks the death and rebirth of the soul. So Eliot's journey is an incarnation of his religious and poetic experience which looks forward to the intersection of this secular world and the religious one as best exemplified in the Magus' journey. Yet the tension between these two worlds is what constitutes Magus' search. It is, in Grover Smith's words, "the monologue of a man who has made his choice, ... achieved belief in the incarnation, who is still part of the life which the redeemer came to sweep away." (Scofield, 1988:203)

### III. ii The Analysis of “Journey of the Magi “ :

#### i. Topological, Prophetic and Typological Senses:

The first five opening lines of the poem are quoted from the Nativity Sermon by Lancelot Andrews, with Eliot’s working his poetic ministry over them. This part of the sermon is quoted by Eliot himself in his essay about Lancelot Andrews. It constitutes an of the Magi’s journey: “It was no summer progress. A cold coming, they had of it at this time of year to take a special a long journey in. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun fathers off, in so listitio brumali, the very dead of winter”. (“ Journey of the Magi “, L.10) These lines had already been taken from the Bible with Lancelot’s linguistic ministry being worked over them. Hence, so apparently the project of the journey is put forward in the inception of the poem. The poem opens with the physical hardships the Magus and his fellows expect to encounter. Also these physical obstructions stand for the difficulties accompanying the course of conversion. But this “very dead of winter” is highly, suggestive phrase as it reinforces and intensifies further the idea of death which infuses the Poem with an air of bleakness and acts as an anticipation of the yet-to-encountered difficulties. Furthermore, Eliot, more than once, started his poems with such wintery scenes , as in the openings of both “the Waste Land ” and “Little Gidding”, so as to pave the way for the would-be resurrection or spiritual rebirth.

The foreshadowing, gloomy and natural scene makes the Magus slip into nostalgic (“ Journey of the Magi “;feelings toward his old state of being; namely,“The summer palaces on slopes”(“ Journey of the Magi “;L.9), and “the silken girls bringing sherbet”(“Journey of the Magi”;L.10), the fact which acts as a contrast to” the camel men cursing and grumbling/... wanting their liner and women”(“ Journey of the Magi “, L11&12). This is telling the fact that “ the Magi(have) left an extravagant and pleasurable existence for their current hardships, having traded in a life of luxury and leisure and sensuality.”(Aquinas,1967:797)

The contrast is intensified and sharpened when the Magus turns to recount the urban and secular parts of the journey. The lines : “the lack of shelters,/ And the cities hostile. and the toms unfriendly/ And the villages dirty and charging high prices.” (“ Journey of the Magi “;L. 13-15), are indicative of the Magus’ estrangement in an indifferent and hostile world. This recalls the imagery and atmosphere of the modern-city journey in Eliot’s previous poetry, but with significant difference here: the Magus’ journey is promising of some spiritual hope or salvation. Yet “the whole secular world , from the cursing camel men to the greedy innkeepers and lazy camels, seemed determined to impede their(the Magi) progress and often caused them to wish for their distant kingdoms.” (“Journey of the Magi”;L.15) Their inner wishes find their echoing’s in the temptation of the outside. The Magi hear “...the voices singing in ... (their) ears, saying / That was all folly,” .” (“ Journey of the Magi “;L. 19 & 20) which is something suggestive of the others’ account or criticism of the journey. Besides,” saying” here implies a strong seduction occurring every now and then. Also , these voices is to make the Magi deviate from their purpose and indulge in wishful thinking of their past sensual world from which they have been uprooted and with which they are no longer in terms.

In the second section, which stands in opposition to the previous one , we have a description of a natural scene, part of which imagery comes from the poet’s personal experience, and observation. Moreover, the natural and iconic symbols in this scene serve a great deal so as to constitute the topological or the moral allegory . In other words, all the objects in this scene signify the events to come in Christ’s life. But what is more significant, as far as Eliot and his poetic creation is concerned, is the personal reminiscences which are commingled with the Biblical natural imagery and narrative. The imagery of this part of poem, furthermore, retains remnants having to do with the fertility myths of Eliot’s early poetry. Moreover, in “the Journey of the Magi”, the imagery has much to do with fertility, renewal and rebirth which are associated with Christ’s advent to man’s world. The Magi reach the Biblical” temperate valley” which is full of “ smelling of vegetation / With a running stream and a water-mill beating darkness.” .” (“ Journey of the Magi” , L.22-3) All these images are evocative of the incarnation associated with the coming of spring and the advent of Christ as well. The images in this poem are highly susceptible of the allegorical interpretation as the Magus’ recounting is not finished yet ; the freshness and innocence of this natural scene puzzles the Magus as to how his reaction to the present scene should be. Hugh Keener(1959:213) clarifies this through saying that: “ostensibly, the temperate valley seems as though it were the ultimate end of the journey’s course clue to its paradisiac state, yet most of the details in this scene are confusing and promising of changing the whole symbolic code.This could be traced in the following lines: “And three trees on the low sky... And an old white horse galloped in the meadow Then welcome 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.” ( “ Journey of the Magi” , L. 24-29)

In these lines there is a shift from the literal and the topological levels to the prophetic and typological ones in the journey. These two levels, to draw upon Bede's distention, are best expressed in verbal and factual allegories respectively as they anticipate, through the natural scene, a change in the symbolic code or system. (MacQuoen, 1970:52) The reader will feel as if he is involved in a sense beyond the Magi's ken and actual experience. In other words, to quote David Ward(1973:240) "their (the Magi) journey is towards the Christ child, toward the evidence of incarnation, or the entry of the divine spirit into the world and into the flesh; (it is) ... towards the New Testament." After sensing physical relief the temperate valley provides, the Magus is now overwhelmed by the texture of the scene which is crying out with intimations because the Magus experiences a transformation in the historical pattern to actualize the primitive apprehension of the numinous.

The Magus roves the prophetic valley unawares. This wandering reaches the threshold of the New Testament being hinted at through the signs in the texture of the valley scene. So Eliot tries to hunt out the significance of those signs or intimations. The above poetic lines, as Williamson sees, signify events to come in the life of Christ, or things done to Him: especially His crucifixion. The three trees on the low sky symbolize the three crosses of Calvary held for crucifixion. They are the very three trees that initiate the Magus' paradoxical situation. He has come this long way to witness birth, yet death is implicit in this birth. The old white horse then is an ambiguous symbol because it is old and refers to the ceasing of the old dispensation. With the coming of Christ, and, on the other hand, it is a traditional symbol of death in the English tradition which is something that recalls the implicit death in the Christ's birth. (Ward,1978:245) The rest of the above lines are driven from the poet's 'own observations as he mentioned them: in' The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" (1958:62). Thus he asks:

Why for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others? The song of one bird, the leap of one fish, at a particular place and time: the scent of one flower, an old women on German mountain path, six ruffians seen through an open window playing cards at night at a small French railway junction where there was watermill.

This extract is a highly quoted one since it has much to do with shedding light on Eliot's most poetry in general, and "the Journey of the Magi" in particular. Hence, the lines: "Then we came: to a tavern with vine-leaven over the lintel, / Six hands at an open door dicing for silver," ("Journey of the Magi", L. 26-7) Here, the poet's own reminiscences are being mixed with the Biblical narrative which is a new context in Gospel story which uses them in an intelligible way while they, in turn, qualify that context with other associations. These associations can also be traced in Eliot's early poetry. The images concerned here also transmuted from the general symbolic context into the limited religious and allegorical context. The tavern or bar, here, symbolizes the human soul having never known or having rejected Christ. The pieces of silver recall Judas Iscariot, the betrayer, and the soldiers dicing at the bottom of the croon to win Christ's garment. The empty wine-skins suggest the spiritual void of the old dispensation as well as that of the utterly, worldly, modern age. All this is imbued with, or suggestive of, death, whilst the vine-leaven hung in a symbol of life. So these images, either of life or death, are paradoxical ones juxtaposed together in temperate valley which is something very significant to the newly converted one. Yet it is worth noticing that the Magus' experience in the valley is paradoxical as far as the fertility ceremonies experienced in Eliot's early poetry are concerned. Hence, Robert Crawford claims, "Christianity is represented by Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" as an escape from Frazerian cycles of fertility ...not as it is mere continuation. (Maxwell, 1952:113) Eliot's breaking with the mythical pagan continuation to join the search for renewal or rebirth of the new hope which represented by Christ is achieved in "the Journey of the Magi" both thematically and poetically.

But the winding path of self-questioning on the part of the Magus held the expedience in the pagan world of the first section and it has done the same with the second section with its highly Christian. Suggestiveness, stands still at this "But there was no infuriation...." ("Journey of the Magi", L. 29) This shows us that the Magus is completely confused about the prophetic signs he has just witnessed, and tells of his real state. He is not merely an observer, but he is the one who is wholly involved in the situation. In other words he has passed through what we can see to be a landscape crying out with significations of ministry and passion, and he can ascertain only that there is no information. With finding the place satisfactory, the narrative of the physical world of the journey is ended, and reached the anticlimax or the sense of the mundane experience which is implied in the word "satisfactory".

### ii. Eliot's Situational Allegory:

At the first sight, it seems that as if this was the end of the Magus' journey. But, on the contrary, the third section propagates a new phase in the journey; while the outward journey is ended, the inner one is begun. They constitute hemispheres each; the physical hemisphere and the spiritual one. The movement is, sometimes, from one hemisphere towards another, either the physical which has the spiritual implied in it or vice versa. With this hemispherical movement, it also moves from one level of interpretation to another; from the narrative or figural allegory to the situational allegory. In the situational allegory the involvement of Magus is as an agency whereby the allegorical meaning is clarified through his intermediacy in a significant context or situation, and hence it is the situation that forms the allegory. The following lines may imbued something about Magus' situation: "All thin wan a long time ago, I remember,/ And I would do it again, but set down/This net down." (" Journey of the Magi",L.32-4)With this recollection on the part of the Magus, the journey is shifted from the outward side to the Inner: one, and the entire significance of which is exercised and examined. The very spherical movement has resulted in the incarnation and conversion as well. Yet a question set for the Magus is this how much he can know from the incarnation alone. Hence the Magus tries to redefine himself and his experience in the light of this questioning, and by replying " I would do it again" implies his quest to substantiate his recognition of the past intimation and their role in his self-definition. Still the final or the perfect Movement is yet to come. It is one which represents the meaning of incarnation, the perfection, the physical and the spiritual. The completion ends the dialectic of death in life and life in death: "where we led all that way for/ Birth or Death"?(" Journey of the Magi" , L. 33) This will intensify the questioning about the significance of the incarnation and reduce it to the birth-death dichotomy. As a result , this birth is the source of agony for the Magi since it leaves open the significance of incarnation. This symbolic transfiguration ,which is accompanied with the sense of estrangement, stands in need of diagnosis and interpretation on the part of the Magus. On coming back home, the sense of estrangement and alienation is magnified, with Prufrock's questioning, "would it have been worth it, after all", in the Magus' mind. Thus the narrator says:

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. (" Journey of the Magi",L. 40-3)

From "finding the place" up "to our places" the spiritual map of the Magus' journey is drawn. The old dispensation here is " the dispensation of the grace of God". The narrator is caught between two experiences and cannot feel at home with either and that gives him the sense of alienation and that is also his dilemmas. So in order to find his way out of this spiritual trap, he has to seek something else. The questioning that was put in the form of birth-death dialectic was understood in terms of renunciation and consummation. But here, being in a state of being caught between two worlds of experience and unable to understand the Christian mystery, then the magus is seeking another death a way out of both the pagan and the Christian worlds so as to guarantee his spiritual escape.

### IV. Conclusion:

Through his iconographic symbols, Eliot designs his journey of faith in the form of prophetic or figural allegory, specifically in the first two sections of the Journey of the Magi which has been in need to be interpreted typologically. However, he modifies his design in the third section of the poem to be a situational allegory. In the light of the symbols that represent events in the spiritual world, he tries to interpret the prophetic situation. Hence he breaks the historical sequence and assumes the Magus' situation. He, in other words, reads or tries to read his own yet-to-be- revealed future. Eliot has added to the Gospel story in the light of his newly- acquired conversion. In spite of the now devotional spirit with which he tackled the theme of the Christian conversion, still he is working under the influence of the Christian traditions so long known to him. Yet, Eliot realigns the Gospel story to create new sensitivity in the deaden institutionalized Christianity. In other words, he puts his experience in a direct order of incarnation through the individual endeavor and the personal quest. By doing so, Eliot steps with the Magus' experience, which is correlative to that of his, further than the mundane Gospel narrative to create an experience of the purely spiritual conversion and the consequences of this conversion, as is clearly shown in the third part of the poem.

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