**The Journey of Magi**

**- T.S.Eliot**

In the [book](http://www.mannmuseum.com/) of Ephesians in the Bible, Paul describes the rebirth of the world upon Christ’s death, emphasizing the Ephesians’ new life (2:4-5). This theme of death and rebirth is present in the poem Journey of the Magi, which, I will argue, is structurally and internally divided into three stages; corresponding to the sacrament of penance: contrition (guilt), confession and satisfaction. To understand this poem, one has to understand the impact that Christ had on the world. At the time of his birth, however, the known world was not stable; people worshipped many gods, and we get a full description of the way life was by the Magi who narrates his story of their journey to Bethlehem to witness the end of an era and the birth of a new one.

According to the Oxford Bible Dictionary, the word contrition means “penitent’s spiritual sorrow for the sins he has committed” and it necessarily includes hatred for such sins, as well as the determination to avoid them in the future. In the first stanza, this “spiritual sorrow” is apparent by the contrast Eliot uses, of the Magi’s difficult journey. In fact, the central focus of [criticism](http://www.mannmuseum.com/essay/famous-poets-and-poems/) has been on the journey; the “A cold coming…” (Line 1) during “…the worst time of the year…” (Line 2), emphasizing the climatic statement of the stanza: “A hard time we had of it.” (Line 16) The Magi talks of their sorrowful past life of ease, the times they “…regretted…the silken girls bringing sherbet.” (lines 8-10), and in the same way that they are physically moving towards Christ, they feel they are progressing spiritually, putting a personal ban on the sinful lives they have had. This act of contrition seems genuine because they are pressured by the “…the voices singing in our ears, saying /That this was all folly (lines 19-20) These are the voices of the camel men, the hostile cities and the unfriendly towns, voices that tempt the wise men to cease their foolish journey and fall, once again, into spiritual degeneration. In the end, the difficulty of the journey comes to remind the Magi of their previous life and thus urges them forward.

The second stanza moves into the third stage in the sacrament: satisfaction, which is the obligatory penance that follows the confession of sins. In keeping with the first stanza, which elaborates the difficulties of the journey, Eliot does not depict the primary aspect of satisfaction in stanza two, but rather the secondary aspect, which according to the Oxford Bible Dictionary, is a “medicinal purpose…[assisting] the penitent to resist relapse into the same kind of sin in the future.” Thus, after their hard time, the Magi, arrive at dawn in a “…temperate valley, /Wet below the snowline smelling of vegetation…” (Lines 21-22), symbolic of the new life attained from their penance. Apart from this, it is interesting to mention Eliot’s wonderful imagery of the “three trees on the low sky,” (line24) not only representing the Magi, but also the three crosses of the crucifixion, as line twenty-seven suggests, of the Roman soldiers dicing for Jesus’ robe and the “And an old white horse…” (Line 25) galloping madly away could represent Judas, and the silver he was paid for betraying Jesus. However, the white horse could later be associated with death, rising up images of the crucifixion and the great disaster that event was for Jesus’ followers.

The second stage of the sacrament, the actual confession, takes place in the final stanza when the narrator starts his confession to the addressee, who may well be taken as St. Mathew, by saying “…set down/This set down/This…” (Lines 33-35) In the Oxford Bible Dictionary, confession is described as “the manifestation of one’s sins to an authorized priest for the purpose of obtaining God’s forgiveness.” The form that the speaker’s confession takes is at first a question, which demonstrates his lack of understanding the significance of Christ’s birth: “This: were we led all that way for/Birth or Death?” (Lines 35-36) The confession concludes, however, earnestly: “…this Birth was/Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.” (lines 38-39). Not only does the speaker confess to not fully comprehending the significance of the event, he also admits a kind of reluctance to believe that anything at all significant did occur; the speaker says: “I had seen a birth and death, /But had thought they were different” (lines 37-38), suggesting that the birth that they had traveled so far to witness was more like an end than a beginning.

In this light, we can see Eliot’s embodiment of the three stages of the sacrament, but we might ask why he rearranged the order of these stages. Instead of beginning with contrition and ending in satisfaction, Eliot opens with contrition in stanza one, moves on to satisfaction in stanza two, and then concludes with confession in the third stanza, suggesting that the soul, in its journey towards Christ and heavenly perfection, can never rest in the certainty of perfection but must be continually engaged in the process of becoming perfect. Not until death can the process come to a close – not until death can true and complete satisfaction be attained, for in life one must constantly be compensating for human weaknesses. Eliot restates this conclusion in the final four lines of the poem: “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.” (Lines 40-43) The Magi have returned to their old estates, the “summer palaces” of the first stanza that they have come to regret, but are “no longer at ease.” This phrase has a double meaning: first, that the Magi do not take pleasure in the comforts of their old life, that they do not fall back into their old sinful ways; and, second, that the Magi no longer blend with their people, who are now alien to them, “…clutching their gods.” (Line 43) The final sentence also multiplies in meaning, reiterating the theme of the poem that the search for perfection is a process only ending in death. On one level, the speaker wishes for his own death in order to end this tiring process. On another, higher level, the speaker wishes for the death of Christ, for it is in Christ’s death that true satisfaction can occur.

Eliot also emphasizes the speaker’s doubt over the death and rebirth in the poem, which suggests both that he indeed wants another death in order to bring about spiritual renewal and that he ought to be happy with another death, but is not certain that he would be happy after his experience with the first death. To conclude, the poem Journey of the Magi touches on the journey of human spirit and their endeavor for perfection. It delivers a message: that we are all involved in the process of perfection of self, and somberly, one can only reach this place of utter satisfaction through death.