Compass Life Adult Sunday School

Jay Wertin - July 14, 2019

**“Christian Themes in Famous Literature: T.S. Eliot’s Poetry”**

**I. T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)**

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on September 26, 1888 in St. Louis, MO. The Eliot family line came out of Boston where they were considered one the elite families in New England. William Greenleaf Eliot, his grandfather moved to St. Louis in 1834 and founded the first \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ church west of the Mississippi. Eliot’s father was a very successful businessman and his mother was a social worker who wrote poetry. Eliot was the youngest of 6 children by 8 years with his oldest sister being 19 years older than him. He was very \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ as a child and because of his illness, spent much of his time alone reading books. In primary school he studied Latin, Ancient Greek, French and German, also trying his hand at poetry. He went to Boston in 1905 to attend Milton Academy for a year and then Harvard from 1906-1909 earning degrees in philosophy and English literature. Some of his first poems and short stories were published in the school’s literary publications. After graduation he worked as a philosophy assistant for a year until he moved to Paris in 1910 to study at the Sorbonne. He returned to Harvard to study Indian philosophy and Sanskrit from 1911-1914, but failed to return for his oral exam. Instead he went to Marburg Germany in 1914 for a summer program, but the outbreak of World War I (1914-1918) caused a quick departure to England where he took a scholarship at Oxford. Hating Oxford, Eliot spent most of his time in London, where he met and became friends with \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, who would have a monumental effect on his life and career. Instead of returning to school, Eliot took a job teaching English and as a university lecturer. He met and married Vivien Haigh-Wood on June 26th, 1915. His marriage would turn out to be very \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ as his wife had numerous health and mental problems causing her to be gone for extended periods of time. This took a toll on Eliot as well and he suffered a nervous breakdown in 1921. They separated in 1933 and in 1938 her brother put her in an asylum where she died of heart failure in 1947. Eliot took a job at Lloyd’s Bank in 1917 working on foreign accounts where he worked for 8 years until he left in 1925 to become a director in the publishing firm, Faber and Faber. He would remain at Faber for the rest of his life. In 1927 Eliot converted to Anglicanism from Unitarianism and the same year became a British citizen. In 1948 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature and the Order of Merit and in 1964 the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Eliot remarried in 1957 to Valerie Fletcher and the couple were together until Eliot died on January 4th, 1965.

**II. Modernism, WWI and the Lost Generation**

Eliot came of age in a world that that was being transformed by new industry, inventions and a rapid growth of cities and growing separation and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ of people. Modernists rejected the beliefs of the past and searched for new meanings and forms in which to express themselves. World War I helped solidify this new way of thinking. The atrocities and prolific meaningless death was worlds away from the “glory” and “honor” that war used to hold. Out of this came the Lost Generation; generally a lost and directionless generation who were confused, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and disoriented by everything that was happening. Specifically a group of expatriate writers, poets and artists trying to make sense of life in this new era through their art. Eliot’s poetry was one of the major voices that defined this generation.

**III. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (1917)**

Prufrock was originally published in Poetry magazine in June of 1915 at the urging of Ezra Pound. It was reissued 2 years later in 1917 when Eliot published his first collection of poems *Prufrock and Other Observations*. Prufrock epitomizes the fear of the generation. A fear of living life and moving forward; a fear of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ that paralyzes and causes procrastination. They are unable to address the really important questions of life and the anonymity of city life breeds uncaring people who only care about their comforts and pleasures. As a result of these fears and insularity, Prufrock is never going to be a whole person and the fragmented images that Eliot provides through the poem reflect this.

**IV. The Waste Land (1922)**

The Waste Land was published in 1922 in The Criterion, a publication that Eliot created and directed throughout its run. *The Waste Land* is considered the one of the most important poems (if not the most important) of the 20th century, describing the whole of the Lost Generation. The Poem addresses the decline of western civilization and how culture was \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and being dumbed down. Four of the five sections in the poem reference the four ancient elements of Earth, Fire, Water and Air which were thought to be the building blocks of all matter. Additionally, Eliot uses six different languages and alludes to 35 different authors, most you probably have never heard of. For the structure of the poem, he loosely uses the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ legend’s Fisher King and the idea that the land, and the people, need a rebirth. The king and the land are tied together and when the Fisher King is wounded, the land suffers as he does. For Eliot, the land can only be healed if the king asks the right questions and sacrifices something. Each section of the five sections of *The Waste Land* describes an empty attempt at rebirth that is ultimately empty. The turning of time, which is portrayed by a wheel always coming back to the same point, is continual throughout the poem which serves to remind them of their \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ with no apparent hope of rebirth. Running throughout each section is the idea of ethical conduct as a means to relieving suffering. The better we treat people, the less suffering there will be in *The Waste Land*. Ultimately we are left with a bleak outlook for humanity at the end of the poem as the search for true \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ has been fruitless.

**V. Ash-Wednesday (1930)**

*Ash-Wednesday* was the first long poem published after Eliot’s conversion in 1927. As the poem’s name implies, it deals with themes of renunciation, humility and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_; a turning away from the world to God. A turning away from the modern world of sickness, decay and meaninglessness, which has been redeemed through a relationship with God. The poem consists of six sections and the beginning four sections describe the speaker’s turning and renouncing the empty things he trusted in like intellect, worldly pleasures and artistry. The turning of time is now up a spiral staircase rather than a wheel showing a positive moving forward. But the speaker struggles with living in a physical body now imbued with the divine presence of God. In the fifth section, he looks beyond himself and offers a prayer for those still caught in the waste land. In this prayer the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ now fills the “still point” at the center of the wheel of time. In the final section, there seems to be a resolve and understanding that he won’t turn back and that because of the grace of God he can now see the world for what it is without despair or indifference.

**VI. Four Quartets (1942)**

The four sections of this poem were written separately over the course of seven years and published as a whole in 1943. It is meant to remind us of a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ piece, each section having five movements. Eliot again invokes the four elements in each section. Time is once again a major theme, but now it has to do with redeeming the present time in light of his eternality. We are made for more than to just end up as ashes and as time marches on, it is not the problem, but what we do with the time we have. There is a rhythm to the poem as themes ebb and flow coming back in slightly different forms. While the poem is intensely \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, it also speaks to his generation that is now in the midst of a second world war trying to provide comfort and hope, which can only be found in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Each of the four quartets focuses on an actual experience at a specific location that portray stages in life. *Burnt Norton*, 1st quartet, is a house and garden set on a hill in the English Cotswolds. Eliot visited the 16th century mansion with a friend from his youth and explores the idea of how to live in this present world while time marches on. The 2nd quartet is *East Coker*, a lovely village in Somerset, England which is the Eliot family’s \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ home. He hearkens back to a time when this village is celebrating a marriage just before the turbulent and bloody religious break with Roman Catholicism, which can only be healed through Christ. *The Dry Salvages*, quartet 3, are a small group of rocks of the coast of Cape Ann, MA where Eliot used to vacation and sail with his family as a boy. The water images of river and ocean are a paradoxical metaphor; they both give life and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. They represent the hardships of life that end in death, but not an empty death as in *The Waste Land*, but here fulfillment in death is found in Christ. The fourth and final quartet is called *Little Gidding*. This was a small religious community formed just before the English Civil War near Cambridge; a place King Charles I fled after a major defeat. This is the most overtly Christian section of the Four Quartets. Just like Charles and Eliot, the readers are called to make a pilgrimage to Little Gidding to commune with God and be purged by the fires of the Holy Spirit to avoid the fires of WWII, which has now come to Great Britain. In this last great work, he not only looks at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ the time by turning to God, but he redeems his poetry by using it to call others to repentance and faith.

**7/21 “Hamlet”**