

## Eliot's Faith: "A Song for Simeon"

Dr. Asha Solomon

*Department of English, Montfort College, Lucknow*

### ABSTRACT

*T.S. Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1888. His grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, was a graduate of Harvard Divinity School who moved as a missionary Unitarian minister to St Louis, Mississippi, and stayed there. He was steadily fearless in the face of cholera, slavery, and the Civil War. In St Louis, he founded schools and, most famously, Washington University. Eliot published his first poetic masterpiece, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in 1915. In 1921, he wrote the poem "The Waste Land" which is regarded as the most important poems of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and gave a whole new genre of literature. For his lifetime of poetic innovation, Eliot won the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948. He died in London, England, in 1965. 'A Song for Simeon' first appeared in a series of Christmas booklets from Faber. Each booklet had one or two illustrations and a poem. Eliot wrote four poems for the series. Journey of the Magi, the first, appeared in August 1927, the next was A Song for Simeon. Simeon, the subject of Eliot's poem is drawn from the Bible and is found in the Gospel of Luke 2:25-35. The early Christian canticle *Nunc dimittis* has been derived from this passage in the Bible. Luke, the disciple of Jesus, writes an account of Simeon, an aged and devout Jew, who sees Mary and Joseph bringing infant Jesus to the Temple of Jerusalem. Luke states that Simeon is "waiting for the consolation of Israel" after being promised that "he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ". Simeon, upon seeing the child, takes him into his arms and prays, prophesying the redemption of the world by Jesus and of the suffering to come.*

T. S. Eliot, poet, critic, and editor, was born on 26<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri. His father Henry Ware Eliot, was the President of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company and mother Charlotte Champe Stearns was a former teacher, an energetic social work volunteer at the Humanity Club of St. Louis, and an amateur poet with a taste for Emerson. Eliot was the youngest of seven children, born when his parents were prosperous and secure in their mid-forties. His paternal grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, had been a protégé of William Ellery Channing, the dean of American Unitarianism. William Eliot graduated from Harvard Divinity School and moved toward the frontier. He founded the Unitarian church in St. Louis and soon became a pillar of the then southwestern city's religious and civic life.

Eliot had both American and English ties. He was educated at Harvard but settled in London in 1915 and acquired British citizenship after his conversion in 1927. To many people, he is the poet who clearly expresses the sense of loss and fragmentation of modern world, a view that is apparent from the title of poetic works such as 'The Waste Land' and 'The Hollow Men'. He published his first poetic masterpiece, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' in 1915. In 1921, he wrote the poem 'The Waste Land' while recovering from exhaustion. The allusion-heavy poem went on to redefine the genre and became one of his most known and talked about poems in literary history. For his lifetime of poetic innovation, Eliot won the Order of Merit and the

---

Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948. He spent most of his life in Europe and breathed his last in London, England, on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1965.

Eliot's early poems published before his famous conversion in 1927 are often regarded as his greatest works, perhaps because they most strongly express the profound personal pain felt by Eliot amidst the chaos of the 1920s. The poems of this period in Eliot's life share one defining characteristic: they are full of disambiguity and usually puzzle the reader as the reader moves through the maze Eliot creates, trying to understand and relate to the underlying despair. These early poems mostly do not provide the reader a substantial solution to this despair.

His first masterpiece, the first "modernist" poem in English, was "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a portrait of an aging man reviewing a life frittered away between timid hopes and lost opportunities:

*For I have known them all already, known them all  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons ...*

With the publication of "The Waste Land" in 1922, he came to international attention. The poem begins,

*April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.*

It expresses the disillusionment and disgust after World War I, portraying a fearful world pursuing barren lusts, seeking desperately for any sign of redemption. It is considered by many to be the most influential poem of the twentieth century. Eliot's despair, however, was short-lived. After reading agnostic Bertrand Russell's essay "A Free Man's Worship," essentially an argument that man must worship man, Eliot decided its reasoning was shallow. He moved in the opposite direction and in 1927 was confirmed in the Church of England. The same year, he also gave up his American citizenship and became a British citizen. Eliot explored various options before examining Christianity and Christ, who he was surprised to find, and after his long search, was able to "bind up the brokenhearted" and "comfort all who mourn."

His faith became more widely known with the publication of "Ash Wednesday" in 1930, a poem showing the difficult search for truth ("Where shall the word be found, where will the word / Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence"). The discovery of a lasting faith is expressed in the repeated phrase, "Because I do not hope to turn again." Though criticized sharply for his turn to Christianity, he continued to express his faith in his poetry. Eliot believed his finest achievement was writing the broadly religious poem "Four Quartets" (1943). It deals with the themes of incarnation, time and eternity, spiritual insight and revelation, ending in an allusion to Pentecost.

After his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, Eliot wrote the Ariel Poems (1927–31) and Ash Wednesday (1930). He contributed to the Ariel Poems series of 38 pamphlets by several authors

published by Faber and Gwyer. 'A Song for Simeon' was the sixteenth in the series. It first appeared in a series of Christmas booklets from Faber. Each booklet had one or two illustrations and a poem. Eliot wrote four poems for the series. *Journey of the Magi*, the first, appeared in August 1927, the next was *A Song for Simeon*

It is seen by many critics and scholars as an argument in favour of his conversion experience. In the poem, Eliot retells the story of Simeon found in the Gospel of Luke in the Bible, Chapter 2 verses 25 through 35. Simeon is a devout Jew who comes face to face with Mary and Joseph and with the infant Jesus, entering the great Temple of Jerusalem, erected by the great King Solomon. According to the Mosaic Law, every Jew was required to bring his firstborn to Solomon's Temple for the ceremony of consecration about 40 days after his birth. Simeon had been promised by the Holy Ghost that he would not die until he had seen the Saviour, He recognizes in the infant Jesus the Messiah promised by the Lord and asks God to permit him to "depart in peace". A disciple of Jesus, Luke, states that Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel after being promised that "he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ". Simeon, upon seeing the child, takes him into his arms and prays, prophesying the redemption of the world by Jesus and of the suffering he was to face to save the world from sin. This prayer would become known later as the *Nunc dimittis* from its Latin incipit or the beginning of the Compline or prayers prescribed and observed by Catholic, Anglican, Eastern Orthodox and Lutheran Churches at the end of the day or as a Night Prayer; *Nunc dimittis* meaning, seeking permission to depart:

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: according to Thy word.  
For mine eyes have seen: Thy salvation,  
Which Thou hast prepared: before the face of all people;  
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles: and to be the glory of thy people Israel.*

In 1886, Eliot's grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, an American educator and Unitarian minister, wrote a poem titled "Nunc dimittis", a few months before his death and two years before T. S. Eliot's birth. The elder Eliot used the same gospel text in his poem. He asks, in his decline, "When may I humbly claim that kind award, / And cares and labors cease " Reverend Robin Griffith-Jones, an Anglican cleric opines that 'A Song for Simeon' is as a tacit tribute by Eliot to his grandfather, "for the last years of a grandfather whose faith his grandson has at last taken up for himself."

Scholars and critics focus on the Gospel narrative for a source of interpretation as Eliot's poem quotes several lines from the passage in Luke, from the *Nunc dimittis*. Scofield, says that the poem is "characterized by deliberately Biblical language, interwoven with actual phrases from the Gospels". In the poem Eliot deals with spiritual angst and the plight of modern man. As with Eliot's other poetry, nothing is idealistic. Far from being a reassuring poem of the fruits which come from a life of spiritual faithfulness, Eliot juxtaposes Biblical imagery against the condition of the modern man, resulting in a mixture of fatigue and rest, hope and despair, redemption and expulsion.

Simeon's prophecy was not limited to the praise of God and the promise of a great kingdom. It included a distressing promise: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which will be spoken against; Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also." Simeon concludes his prophecy by declaring that this child will cause the innermost thoughts of many hearts to be revealed, exposing the true character of the inner man. The song and then the declaration of the Biblical Simeon is oxymoronic. The implication of Simeon's song is that Jesus is the comfort of mankind, but will result in tumult and tribulation. This distress was not limited to Jesus' family but would also bring earthly pain and suffering upon all those who loved him most dearly. Before his crucifixion, Christ warned his disciples that the suffering would not only continue, but also become more intense:

*Then shall they (the nations) deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another (Matt 24:9-10).*

In the first stanza, Simeon he tells of his own death; in the second, of the destruction of Jerusalem, decades later, by Rome's armies. We are reminded of the New Testament: the foxes have holes, while the Son of Man has nowhere to rest; the speaker's descendants, in flight from Jerusalem, will have to occupy the foxes' homes. In the third stanza, Eliot presents allusions. Jesus will knot cords to drive the traders from the Temple; Jesus himself will be whipped with scourges; and he will hear the lamentation of the women of Jerusalem as he walks to his death. The reader is reminded of the liturgical Stations of the Cross raised on a hill; of the "abomination of desolation" decried by Jesus; and of his mother Mary's sorrow where the sword pierces her heart.

"Lettest thou thy servant depart in peace," said Luke's Simeon, "according to thy word." But the word will be fulfilled in a faith and an age that Eliot's speaker can see only in prophecy. For the first and last time, Eliot uses "Thee", as his speaker looks forward to the praise offered by the Church. As the speaker visualizes the future, he turns back to himself alone and prays, "Grant me" — not us — "thy peace." Luke's Simeon warns Mary, "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also. But Eliot hardly addresses Mary in the poem. Eliot refers "thou", "thy", and "thee" to God. The reader wonders whether God's own heart will be pierced at the crucifixion of His son.

Eliot titled the poem as *A Song 'for' Simeon*, not 'of' Simeon. The poem can be read as a song for Simeon to sing, or as a song to be sung for Simeon. We may imagine ourselves to be hearing either Simeon's prophetic voice, or the voice of a poet singing on Simeon's behalf or in his honour from a later age.

The poet, having followed his grandfather's faith, now finally understands what his grandfather had experienced; and he knows how poignant the sight can be. Baptised into the death of Christ, Eliot has undergone for himself the birth season of decease. But, like Simeon, he has seen no end to the agonies through which the world's new life will be born.

Eliot's poem is best understood as a work of Christian existentialism inspired by Kierkegaard's works. According to Kierkegaard, true faith requires that one defy any and all empirical claims of reality, and boldly chose a faith which lies outside of the physical realm. Writing under the

pseudonym of Johannes Climacus, he explains that the incarnation of Christ is the root cause of absurdity:

*The absurd is that the eternal truth has entered time, that God has entered existence, has been born, has grown, and so on, has become precisely like any other human being, quite indistinguishable from other humans. The absurd is precisely by its objective repulsion the measure of inward faith...Christianity has declared itself to be the eternal that has entered time, that has proclaimed itself as a paradox, and demands faith's inwardness in relation to that which is a scandal to the Jews, folly to the Greeks, and absurd to the understanding. It is impossible to say this more strongly than by saying: subjectivity is truth, and objectivity is repelled by it - by virtue of the absurd. (Kierkegaard)*

## WORKS CITED

- i. **Brown, James. (2015):** "T.S. Eliot and the Paradox of Faith and Life." <http://www.academia.edu>
- ii. **Bruce Toien:** "T.S. Eliot's Spiritual Rebirth", DeKalb Literary Arts Journal vol. 10.
- iii. **Dobrinska, Leah. (2015):** "T.S. Eliot and the Struggle of Faith." <http://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/t.s.-eliot-and-the-struggle-of-faith>
- iv. **"Eliot, T.S.,"** *New World Encyclopedia*, web, [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/T.S.\\_Eliot](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/T.S._Eliot).
- v. **Helen Gardner:** *The Faber Book of Religious Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).
- vi. **Hugh, K.:** (1969). *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*. New Delhi: Prentice Hall.
- vii. **James, E. Miller:** (1977) *T.S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land*. London: The Penn University Press. MacDiarmid, Laurie J. (2005).
- viii. **Kierkegaard, Soren.:** "Concluding Unscientific Postscript." *Classics of Philosophy*. Ed. Louis P. Pojman. 2nd. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. .
- ix. **Robin Griffith-Jones:** Looking forward to a distant faith : *Church Times*, 25 April 2017.
- x. **Spurr, Barry. (2010):** "The impact of T.S. Eliot's Christianity on his poetry" <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/>
- xi. **Taylor & Francis e-Library:** Murphy, Russell Elliott. *Critical Companion to T.S. Eliot*. Oxford: OUP, 2005. Print
- xii. ***The Complete Poems of T. S. Eliot (Faber, 1962).***
- xiii. **T.S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature":** *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., )