

T. S. Eliot's Gerontion: A Critical Analysis

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T.S. Eliot's 'Gerontion', the most important poem of 1920 volume, is a dramatic monologue of an old man who reminisces about his lost vitality to live and his lost hope of spiritual rebirth. Gerontion emerges as a symbol of spiritual sterility and inactivity in the post world war I Western society. The poem is interesting also because it foreshadows more sophisticated work of Eliot, the Waste Land.

The landscape surrounding the decaying house of the speaker points to degenerated conditions of life. The "goat coughs at night" in the field and all around there are "Rocks, moss, stonecrop" and more. The details underline the inertness and sterility characterising post world war western society. The world is different than it was when he was at war. There is a woman making tea and "poking at the peevish gutter" and he is "an old man". He uses a metaphor to describe himself as "A dull head among windy spaces". This description alludes to an inescapable emptiness and an inability to think of the ways to overcome the situation.

In the second and third stanzas of 'Gerontion', a number of "signs" are introduced. These are the symbols which can be linked to the political and religious conditions of the age. The line "The word within a word, unable to speak a word" alludes to the speech by a seventeenth-century bishop about the Christ child and God's word. There are natural images which describe the speaker's immediate surroundings and the happenings of the season. They also describe those who live around him. There is "Mr. Silver" who cares for his possessions more than anything. The second person is Hakagawa, who is "bowing among the Titians," as if worshipping a dead artist. "Madame de Tornquist" who's "shifting candles" in a dark room, ominously suggests some kind of sinful ceremony. Finally, Fräulein von Kulp appears guilty of something with "one hand on the door". These ghost-like neighbours are followed by the speaker who claims that he has "no ghosts".

In the next stanza, the speaker makes a series of statements about history, which clearly implies that it is hard to grasp and understand it. There are negative complications to be dealt with and everyone is guided by "vanities," History or historical sense could have been a liberating experience for the sensible mind; but for the "dry brain in a dry season" history can arouse only negative passion and ambition. No wonder, 'history' has been personified as "She" possessing "many cunning passages" and "contrived corridors". The reference to knowledge alludes to the original sin of Adam and Eve, signifying that the man (or society as a whole) has willfully disobeyed God. Naturally, Christ is no longer a symbol of forgiveness, but is instead represented by the fierce image of "Christ the tiger". In absence of any hope for spiritual redemption, the old man says, "Think now"; his statement underlies the acute urgency to find out some viable option to the present agonizing decadence. That Gerontion seeks to turn to 'history' suggests that this could be the option the old man is exploring for in his search for meaning. However, his description of the path of history as "cunning" and "contrived" underlies his disillusionment with his current predicament. As he continues his musings on history, he describes how and what "she gives" and what it does to those who receive it. Gerontion concludes with the expression: "Think / Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices / Are fathered by our

In the sixth stanza, the speaker repeats the phrase "Think at last" a few times while proposing ideas about the past, present, and future. It emphasizes his agony and the resultant urgency to explore the possibility of avoiding the void. The phrase "the tiger springs in the new year" once again seems to negate the possibility of redemption through the conventional image of the Christ in view of negative changes in the social and political conditions of life. He then invites "you" to "meet upon this" and to 'speak' honestly about the loss- the removal from "your heart," and passion. The human beings have achieved material development at the cost of spiritual enlightenment. Therefore, the fact that they have yet to reach a conclusion relates to his own predicament, his "Stiffen[ing]" in the rented, degraded house.

In the last lines of this stanza, the speaker returns to the paramount issue that has seized his mind, the sense of eternal loss. He speaks about losing the parts of his life that were worth something. His passion is gone and even if it wasn't, he doesn't think he should keep it. Everything that remains is sure to be "adulterated" or manipulated.

In the concluding stanza of the poem, images allude to important, but disturbing events of the world war I such as "weevil" delaying and the "shuddering Bear / In fractured atoms". Our attention is drawn back to the "old man" who is at the centre of these thoughts and predictions. He is driven by the trade winds "to a sleepy corner" where he whiles away the rest of his life. It is important that the last stanza of '*Gerontion*' is only two lines long. It emphasizes once again the "dry season" and refers to all such thoughts as come from a "dry brain". The speaker's separation from the contemporary world, specifically present trends in politics, religion, and social life, is quite clear.