



## An Analysis of *Gerontion* by T.S. Eliot

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### Abstract

Thomas Stearns Eliot, who is believed to be one of the most important poets of his time in the English and American Poetry, as well as today, left many poems in most of which he criticized and even rejected the Western Puritanist society and the principles of Romanticism. In this brief study, one of T.S. Eliot's major poems, 'Gerontion' will be presented with other critics' and this researcher's interpretations. The speaker of the poem is an old man in an old house whose thoughts drift while being read to by a boy, and these thoughts form the poem. He misses fighting in the war and laments his presence in the mundane and common-place house (Basu, 2017). Since it will be useful to know T.S. Eliot's philosophy of life and his background in order to understand and interpret his works better, his life story and background are also provided briefly in the first part of this study. In the final part, conclusions in connection with the society in which we live in were drawn from T.S. Eliot's 'Gerontion'.

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### 1. Introduction

Davies, Gardner and Tate (2018) give a brief summary of Eliot's early years and state Eliot was a member of a recognized New Britain family that had moved to St. Louis, Missouri. His family permitted him the greatest training in his chance with no impact from his dad to be "functional" and to start a new business. After Smith Academy in St. Louis, Eliot went to Milton, in Massachusetts; from Milton he entered Harvard in 1906; only after three years rather than the standard four years, he received a B.A. in 1909, and he was influenced by George Santayana, the philosopher and poet, and the critic Irving Babbitt at Harvard. Davies, Gardner and Tate (2018) point out that Babbitt caused him to gain an anti-Romantic attitude that grew stronger because of his later reading of British philosophers F.H. Bradley and T.E. Hulme which lasted through his life. In the academic year 1909–10 he served as an assistant in philosophy at Harvard.

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He was in France in the year 1910–11 and attended Henri Bergson's lectures in philosophy at the Sorbonne and also spent his time reading poetry with Alain-Fournier. Eliot's study of the poetry of Dante, of the English writers John Webster and John Donne, and of the French Symbolist Jules Laforgue assisted him to find his own style. Between 1911 and 1914, he was at Harvard again and spent his time reading Indian philosophy and studying Sanskrit. In 1913, he read Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*; by 1916 in Europe, he had completed a dissertation entitled "Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley". Yet, World War I had intervened, and he never went back to Harvard to take the final oral test for the Ph.D. degree. In 1914, Eliot met the American poet Ezra Pound and began a close association with him.

Davies, Gardner and Tate (2018) also summarize Eliot's career history: With the publication in 1922 of his poem *The Waste Land*, Eliot won an international reputation. *The Waste Land* expresses with great power the disenchantment, disillusionment, and disgust of the period after World War I. In a series of vignettes, loosely linked by the legend of the search for the Grail, it portrays a sterile world of panicky fears and barren lusts, and of human beings waiting for some sign or promise of redemption. The poem's style is highly complex, erudite, and allusive, and the poet provided notes and references to explain the work's many quotations and allusions. This scholarly supplement distracted some readers and critics from perceiving the true originality of the poem, which lay rather in its rendering of the universal human predicament of man desiring salvation, and in its manipulation of language, than in its range of literary references. In his earlier poems Eliot had shown himself to be a master of the poetic phrase. *The Waste Land* showed him to be, in addition, a metrist of great virtuosity, capable of astonishing modulations ranging from the sublime to the conversational.

As Brown (1989) remarks, "It frequently happens that an artist who has had enormous prestige during his lifetime suffers a temporary decline in his reputation after his death. T.S. Eliot is the perfect example. The challenge that his early poetry, and especially *The Waste Land* raised for the young poets of the 1920's is simply a matter of literary history. Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, Hart Crane and Archibald MacLeish (to name American poets of the period) immediately responded to the challenge in various ways" (para 1). Brown (1989) also points out that Eliot was a persuasive and influential critic who set up the context for his own poetry, but in the end it is poets, not academics, who create the canon of their predecessors. For at least thirty years Eliot had a delighted life among many other poets, even the ones who could never accept his theology and politics. Eliot gained truly an international reputation which impacted the life of poetry in such different places as India, Greece, and Latin America: the kind of fame that a poet such as Hardy or Frost never had outside his own language. We can refer to Joseph Brodsky's elegy, "Verses on the Death of T.S. Eliot," written in exile in the

Soviet Far North on Jan. 12, 1965, as an example of the way in which Eliot could affect young poets in the remotest places (para 1).

"Gerontion" is a poem by T. S. Eliot that was first published in 1920. As O'Reilly (2012) remarks, "T.S. Eliot's poem, "Gerontion" begins with "an old man in a dry month" and ends with "a dry brain in a dry season," as if the fertile rains that would have brought a sprout of faith have passed him by, leaving him spiritually shattered upon the shore of history. The idea of history is as important in this poem as it is in the rest of Eliot's work. His examination of history is an examination of the way we look at ourselves and the way we look at the past" (2012, para 1).

"Being that 'Gerontion' is one of the earliest works to be considered truly a modernism work, it is quite easy to see modernism characteristics come out in this poem, and why it is considered to be a modernism work. One of the most evident features of this poem is that the speaker focuses on the negative things in his life and also the destruction of his life" ("Gerontion," n.d.).

## **2. T. S. Eliot's Life and Philosophy**

As Kantarcioğlu (1987) states, Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in a small town, St. Louis of Missouri in New England, America. In 1906, he entered Harvard University. During the years at the university, he was influenced by Babbitt and he was interested in the literature of Elizabethan Period and James I Period. He was also interested in Italian Renaissance and Mystic Indian Philosophy. When the First World War started, he went to France and Germany. He studied literature and philosophy in these European countries. Then, he went to England and studied Greek Philosophy. He became a teacher in London. He worked at Llyod Bank until 1925. After that, he directed a printing house called Faber and Faber. One of his most important poems, 'The Love Song of J.A. Prufrock' was published in a magazine. His poems were gathered in various books. Eliot gathered his literary critiques in 'The Sacred Wood' and 'Homage to Dryden'. (p. VII)

Eliot with Hulme and Ezra Pound's opposition to romanticism was influenced by the French poets of the nineteenth century, Jules Laforgue, Theophile Gautier, and Charles Baudelaire. French symbolists, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud and Stephane Mallarme also influenced T.S. Eliot's works (Kantarcioğlu, 1987, p. VII).

Kantarcioğlu (1987) categorizes T.S. Eliot's poems into two groups: the first group covers his poems written until 1922, and the second group consists of the poems he wrote after 1922. The poems in the first group tell about the moral corruption of the Western Society. The poems of the second group are his works created while he was seeking spiritual peace after he had converted his sect and become an Anglican (p. VIII).

Kantarcioğlu (1987) also summarizes the factors that influenced Eliot's art and states that Dante's poems, Bible and religious literature played an important role in his art.

T.S. Eliot also has plays such as ‘Murder in the Cathedral’, ‘The Family Reunion’, ‘and The Cogtail Party’, ‘The Confidential Party’, and ‘The Elder Statesman’. Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize for his critiques. He, as a metaphysician and symbolist, influenced the poets after him. For T.S. Eliot, man’s actualization of himself and living for greater values but not for small values are important for the philosophy of life. According to T.S. Eliot, man has an apriori. Man has to know himself and form a point of view of him so that he can realize other points of view. For him, life is action not vain speculations. Eliot was a Christian existentialist. Although he had been a puritan and later a Unitarian in his past, he opposed Puritanism later in his life. Eliot claimed that there were three levels of existence; the first is the esthetic level of existence, the second is the ethical level of existence, the third is the authentic level of existence. In the first level, man knows himself in order to love; the aim is ‘love’ not ‘lust’. In the second level, man should love other people. In the third level, man should have a freedom of will. Man has to identify his conscience, and have a discipline of soul (pp. VII-X).

In his works, T.S. Eliot criticizes the Puritanist western culture, and also romanticism. According to T.S. Eliot, Puritanism makes man a nonentity because Puritanism formulates man’s life strictly according to Bible. Tamplin (1987) also emphasizes this point and states that “Puritanism begins, historically as a pressure group within the Church of England during the second half of the sixteenth century after the English Church’s break with Rome. The Church in England wished to hold a line of compromise between Rome and Protestantism, whereas the Puritans - the name was first used in the 1560s - aimed to ‘purify’ the Church of all practices that they saw as ‘idolatrous’ and to base the Church’s practice, doctrine, and observance firmly on the Bible, subordinating the claims of reason and tradition to the literal arbitration of the printed text” (p. 35).

T.S. Eliot pointed out that Puritanism forced people to suppress their emotions and passions. Eliot was for ‘passions’ and ‘emotions’ although he was a Christian, because, as he claimed, man needs ‘passions’ and ‘emotions’ in order to love. (Kantarcioglu, 1987, pp. 10-11). T.S. Eliot opposed ‘Romanticism’ and ‘Humanism’ since they rejected a proclaimed God. According to Humanism and Romanticism, man can be God and as perfect as God. Man is the centre of universe. However according to T.S. Eliot man cannot be God, but he can only be in the same resonance of God, in other words he can be God-like. On the other hand, both Romantism and Humanism despise tradition and its values, and establish new values through experience. T.S. Eliot was a traditionalist, but his traditionalism was not static, on the contrary, his traditionalism was dynamic. According to T.S. Eliot’s ideas, traditions should be revised in terms of the new needs of man. T.S. Eliot was respectful to the past but he was firmly against inertia of the society. He was a man of action, thought, passions and emotions (Kantarcioglu, 1987, pp. 6-7).

T. S Eliot became a British citizen in 1927; long associated with the publishing house

of Faber & Faber, he published many younger poets' work, and eventually became director of this publishing house. After a disreputably unhappy first marriage, Eliot separated from his first wife in 1933, and remarried Valerie Fletcher in 1956. T. S. Eliot received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948 and died in London on January 4, 1965 (T.S. Eliot n.d. para 5).

### 3. Gerontion

“The title means "little old man" and comes from the Greek *geron* "old man." The epigraph is from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* III.1.32-34. The scene is a Vienna prison, the speaker is the state's disguised ruler, Duke Vincentio, and the listener a young man, Claudio, who has been condemned to death by Vincentio's temporary stand-in, Angelo, for bedding and getting with child Juliet, Claudio's betrothed, before marriage. Eventually Vincentio convicts Angelo himself of violating this law, and the death penalty is revoked in both cases so that the marriages can be made to flourish happily and fruitfully” (“Gerontion” n.d., para. 1).

In ‘Gerontion’, T.S. Eliot analyses another split personality just like ‘Prufrock’ in ‘The Love Song of J.A. Prufrock’. Kantarcioğlu (1987) states that also Gerontion, like Prufrock, is a typical Western intellectual who tries to exist with only one of his faculties and who sees the truth as his thoughts and within the boundaries of science (p.35). Besides, Mayer (1989) points out that “...in ‘Gerontion’, Eliot ‘swallowed up’ but did not obliterate Gerontion’s individuality so that his personal sense of failure of Western culture that is the poem’s main preoccupation the failure of the individual and the failure of the culture coincide. Gerontion the individual’s failure to participate in life is both a symbol and a cause of the failure of his world, that is, the world of Western culture begun by the Greeks: Gerontion (Greek for “little old man”) is the shriveled remnant of the West’s twenty-five-hundred-year-old cultural heritage” (p. 219).

Gerontion symbolizes the inactive society. Gerontion that means ‘little old man’ refers to the inertia of the society in which T.S. Eliot lived because, as we can infer, old man moves slowly and sometimes he is stable.

#### Gerontion

Thou has nor youth nor age  
 But as it were an after dinner sleep  
 Dreaming of both.  
 Here I am, an old man in a dry month,  
 Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.

In the initial lines of the poem above, Eliot introduces the protagonists, Gerontion-the little old man. We can infer that “... an old man in a dry month” symbolizes the corrupted

inactive member of the barren and unproductive Western society in the nineteenth century. That inactive old man is blind and cannot read and cannot do anything but waits for something to happen. According to Svarny (1988), "... Gerontion defines himself by what he has not done, by the violent heroic action and participation he has not achieved. The only activity he achieves is verbal" (p. 177).

I was neither at the hot gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,  
Bitten by flies, fought.

According to T.S' Eliot, there is an objective correlativity between man and nature. Man does not consist of thoughts only. He also needs passions and emotions in order to understand nature. As inferred from the above lines, this old man is disconnected from the nature because he has never been to a fight in the warm rain, like farmers fight with nature. This fight has no negative sense. This fight means the relation and correlation with nature. However, Gerontion is aware of his state. He suffers from what he has not done. Mayer (1989) states that "Gerontion's failures are of nonparticipation, of withdrawal before life, of failing to dare 'I was neither at the hot gates / Nor fought in the warm rain... Lacking the interest or the passion to become involved, whether at the hot gates of history at Thermopylae, where the Greeks stood heroically against the Persian horde, at the hot gates of life like Marvell's lovers, or at any psychic gates that impede and enclose, Gerontion embodies the spirit of reluctance and withdrawal that, in the culture or the individual leads to doubt and spiritlessness, Eliot's fatal acedia that dampens enthusiasm and dispels conviction" (p. 228). According to Mayer's interpretation, Gerontion symbolizes "...the spirit of all the nonheroes of the West who did not fight its battles, as well as of the Narcissus tendency in us to withdrawal rather than to reach out," (p. 228).

My house is a decayed house,  
And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner,  
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,  
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.  
The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;  
Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.  
The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,  
Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.  
I an old man,

A dull head among windy spaces.

As we can infer from the lines of the poem above, ‘the decayed house’ where the little old man, Gerontion lives symbolizes the Western culture and the Western society, and the ‘Jew’ is the money, which is the most powerful element in that society; it is the ‘materialism of the West’. Kenner (1959) states that ‘the decayed house’ can be interpreted as “... the European family, the Mind of Europe, the body, finally the brain” (p. 108). Antwerp, Brussel, and London, which are the most important industrial and mercantile cities of Europe, symbolize and emphasize materialism that lacks moral and spiritual values. As this researcher thinks, Romanticism and Humanism set up new values through experience and disregard traditional values but both of them fail, because their values are only materialistic and do not include spiritual values. Hence, people who live in such a system cannot be happy and they suffer from what they lack in their spirits. Only mind and knowledge don’t mean anything, man also needs passions and emotions; man is not merely a chemical substance. We can conclude that T.S. Eliot implied the sickness of the Western Culture and the society with the coughing goat. Especially, the verb ‘cough’ symbolizes sickness. The lines, ‘The woman keeps the kitchen, makes the tea, / Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter’ tell us that the woman of the West is also sick, with no passion or emotion. Mayer (1989) states that “...Nature, the coughing goat, is sick and weak, and woman is reduced to a peevish domestic, poking about. Western culture dwells in literally spiritless emptiness” (p. 229). The lines, ‘I an old man / A dull head among windy spaces’ mean Gerontion is a brain full of knowledge in the spaces where there are a lot of vain speculations. Man does not exist just because he thinks. According to Eliot, “I think therefore I am only a vision”. The faculty of thinking doesn’t make a man a human being. A man also needs passions, emotions and faith.

Signs are taken for wonders. ‘We would see a sign!’

The word within a word, unable to speak a word,

Swaddled with darkness. In the juvenescence of the year

Came Christ the tiger

In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering Judas,

To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk

Among whispers; by Mr. Silvero

With caressing hands, at Limoges

Who walked all night in the next room;

By Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians;

By Madame de Tornquist, in the dark room

Shifting the candles: Fraulein von Kulp

Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door.

Vacant shuttles

Weave the wind. I have no ghosts,

An old man in a draughty house

Under a windy knob.

The lines of the poem given above tell us Gerontion's consciousness of his sterility. For Gerontion, 'Signs' are only traces which put him into curiosity and astonishment. Actually, these signs should have shown Gerontion the existence of God. Gerontion is aware of his failure in adopting a multiplicity of points of view in order to grasp all the dimensions. Gerontion, as we can infer from these lines, is surrounded by darkness and cannot see the truth. Pharisees, which means false believers or false religious people demanded 'wonders' to prove God's existence; they didn't see the signs, that is, the signs in the nature, which indirectly prove God's existence. 'We would see a sign' implies this.

The distortion of the past is symbolized by 'Came Christ the tiger'. Actually, Christ comes as a Lamb not as a Tiger. This distortion makes Christ the Savior a Destroyer. The Spring symbolizes 'the Life after Death', 'Youth', and 'Productivity' but Gerontion does not realize them. 'Mr. Silvero', 'Hakagawa', 'Madame de Tornquist' worship different things, which implies perversion in religion.

"Vacant shuttles / Weave the wind. I have no ghosts, /An old man in a draughty house / Under a windy knob." We understand that vain speculations are implied in these lines of the poem. Mere scientific knowledge is not enough for man; he also needs ghost, that is, emotions and passions, and trust in God. Kantarcioğlu (1987) states that Gerontion is conscious of his spiritual dilemma, and this makes his situation more tragic (p. 37). On the other hand, Mayer (1989) states that "...Gerontion's eye of vision sees the emptiness of such surrogate forms of religious belief: 'Vacant shuttles / Weave the wind.'" This emptiness reaches to Gerontion himself: he has no ghosts; this old man in a drafty house living in a windy world. By denying himself ghosts, which include the Holy Ghost, unholy memories, and the unquiet shades of the past, Gerontion denies connections with a past that fathers present sterility. His decayed house is 'draughty', filled with winds of nature that cannot be transmuted into spirits, into the Holy Spirit" (p. 230-231).

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors

And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,

Guides us by vanities. Think now

She gives when our attention is distracted



And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions  
 That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late  
 What's not believed in, or is still believed,  
 In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon  
 Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with  
 Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think  
 Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices  
 Arc fathered by our heroism. Virtues  
 Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.  
 These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.

As we see in the above lines of the poem, a question, 'After such knowledge, what forgiveness?' is asked. Eliot asks if forgiveness with such kind of knowledge which is disconnected with God and Nature is possible. History has many corners and gates which were built with cunning knowledge. Cunning knowledge is disconnected with faith which is a misuse of intelligence. Such kind of knowledge puts us in the wrong direction. With such kind of knowledge, man deceives himself. History does not create a better future for Gerontion because what he knows about history is deceptive, and he takes each level of consciousness he reaches in the history as an absolute truth. In weak hands, that is, those who use such information only within the boundaries of science and only at one level but not at a multiplicity of points of view reach nowhere, but commit sins like Adam and Eve did by eating an apple from the wrath-bearing tree.

The tiger springs in the New Year. Us he devours. Think at last  
 We have not reached conclusion, when I  
 Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last  
 I have not made this show purposelessly  
 And it is not by any concitation  
 Of the backward devils.  
 I would meet you upon this honestly.  
 I that was near your heart was removed there from  
 To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.  
 I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it  
 Since what is kept must be adulterated?  
 I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:

How should I use them for your closer contact?

According to Cooper (2006), “Gerontion is saying that passion is precisely what undermines knowing – those things that we hold on to in life are adulterated things, adulterated inherently. Some readers hear these lines as saying that, as we age, the things of this life, such as passion, become adulterated as time goes on. With experience, we lose our innocence. Eliot is far more radical than this. We are born adulterated beings and remain so until we arrive on the other side of experience. Passion, rooted in the senses – “sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch” and, as a result, in a passionate self – seems to be the very thing that impedes us in our contact with reality or the truth of our being. Intellectual and emotional decisiveness can come only when we dispense with the passionate self” (p. 58). We can infer from the above lines that Gerontion is conscious of his state. He is conscious that he lacks passion which will enable him to be in the same resonance with God, and which will enable him to reach the ethical level of existence and the authentic level of existence. These levels require inner peace and peace with the Nature. ‘You’ is the Holy Spirit, his physical existence, and God. Gerontion frankly tells what he feels about his spiritual deficiency, which he suffers from.

These with a thousand small deliberations  
 Protract the profit of their chilled delirium,  
 Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,  
 With pungent sauces, multiply variety  
 In a wilderness of mirrors. What will the spider do,  
 Suspend its operations, will the weevil  
 Delay? De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel; whirled  
 Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear  
 In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the windy straits  
 Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn.  
 White feathers in the snow, the Gulf claims,  
 And an old man driven by the Trades  
 To a sleepy comer.  
 Tenants of the house,  
 Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.

T.S. Eliot is a new classist. He is against Humanism and Romanticism. According to Eliot, man is not or cannot be God, but he can be in the same resonance of God. On the other hand, Eliot rejects man who is at the level of animal and plant. According to him, man is limited but capable of perfection. The above final lines tell us that everything in

the universe is under the control of God. According to Ransom (1978), “...Gerontion’s conscience is uneasy because of lacking spiritual morals in himself” (p. 170). In this perfectly functioning universe under the control of God, man is like the feathers flying here and there against the wind trying to find the truth, but man cannot actualize himself within mere boundaries of scientific knowledge. Mind should correlate with passions and emotions.

Gerontion is aware of this, and he knows that he is only a tenant blown by the winds, that is, barren thoughts of himself gained from humanism into a decayed house which is the corrupted society and its culture.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Thomas Stearns Eliot’s message is universal. Man, first, must know himself and has a perspective of life in order to understand other points of view. If we do so, we can love other people and reach the ethical level of existence. Turkish dervish, Yunus Emre gives the same message saying “There is an ‘I’ with me deeper than ‘I’”. Man should try to find his unknown faculties and know himself as much as possible.

Nowadays, nations try to get closer to the West and its culture. Before doing so, we must know what industrialism brings. When trying to be industrialized, we must not give harm to the nature. Living disconnected with nature takes humanity to catastrophe. This conclusion reminds us of the ballad by the well known Turkish popular poet-singer, Aşık Veysel. With his ballad, Aşık Veysel, who lived between 1894 and 1973, gives a message to the whole humanity to emphasize that nature is indispensable. The following are the initial ten lines of his ballad.

I attached to many, thinking they were my fellows  
 My faithful beloved is black soil  
 I wandered around, got tired for nothing  
 My faithful beloved is black soil  
 I set my heart on so many nymphs  
 They were neither faithful nor aidful  
 Whatever I wanted, I got from the soil  
 My faithful beloved is black soil

Besides, interpreting everything merely within the boundaries of science and concrete knowledge leads us to dogmatism or to ‘Puritanism’, that is a firm control of religion in society. To set a balance in everything is the best that we can do. If we do not establish such a balance, there will be clashes in the society, and one of the sides will try to misuse the society.

In conclusion, with his poem, T.S. Eliot gives universal messages. Only intellectual thinking is not sufficient, we, as human beings, need emotions and feelings and human beings cannot survive without nature. Money cannot replace nature, emotions, moral values, and love.

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