

## THE STILL POINT OF THE TURNING WORLD

**Synopsis:** 1940, London: a librarian trapped during the worst of the Blitz considers the poetry of T.S. Eliot.

**Run time:** approximately 10 minutes

**NOTES:** The librarian may be presented as a person of any gender or age. The phrase “the handsome second lieutenant with the horn-rimmed glasses” may be substituted variously for “the distinguished professor with the white mustache” or “the lovely young lady with the horn-rimmed glasses” or “the silver-haired woman with the sparkling eyes,” or whatever seems suitable along these lines.

Eliot quotations and references that appear in the poem are in italics. If they are spoken by the Eliot recording, it is indicated. If not, they are read by the librarian.

On occasion the play vacillates between tenses. The librarian is speaking to the audience from “the still point of the turning world” – a space outside of time caught between the realms of life and death. However the librarian alternates between this world and re-experiencing the moments of and leading up to her death. As a general rule, when the librarian speaks in *past tense*, she is addressing the audience directly and telling them about what happened to her in as direct and matter-of-fact a manner as she can muster. When the librarian speaks in the *present tense*, she is reliving what happened to her when she died, including the excitement, terror and sadness of that experience.

## THE STILL POINT OF THE TURNING WORLD

*A record crackles. It's T.S. Eliot reading aloud from his Four Quartets. We hear his heady, nasal, droning voice recite the first lines of Burnt Norton:*

ELIOT: *Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation.*

*At the still point of the turning world. THE LIBRARIAN – awkward, excitable, British – looks out at the audience from a small pool of light.*

THE LIBRARIAN: I simply...did not want to leave the library. I had just taken a copy of Yeats from the handsome second lieutenant with the horn-rimmed glasses – the one whose name I can never work up the courage to ask. He always returns his books with loads of underscores, and I really ought to chastise him but every time I open my mouth to try, no words come out. So I was returning Yeats to his spot on the shelf when the sirens went off and I didn't want to put it down and I didn't want to go. I was worried, you see. Really *very* worried. About the books. Whether the Jerrys might get them. Burn them. Or something. I don't know I gather that's what Jerrys do these days.

So I stayed. Perhaps it was foolish. Really *very* foolish. All right it was definitely foolish. But...I...*stayed*. When the sirens were blaring and everyone ran to find a shelter, there I was with this small volume of Yeats in my hands and I guess I just froze. From the back of a dusty aisle, British Poets, in front of Y for Yeats, William Butler...I saw the people rushing out, the handsome second lieutenant with the horn-rimmed glasses among them, and I watched them go with the book in my hands and I just stood there. The Home Guard, must have been, stuck their heads in and called out, "Allo, anyone 'ere? Come on, this way, out we go!" But I just couldn't make my feet move. They snapped off the lights, and I heard the large doors boom shut, and then just like that, I was alone. There was chaos outside the library, but inside it was quiet and still and I had Yeats, William Butler in my hands and I just...couldn't let him go.

There I was at Y. I could have popped Yeats back on the shelf and gone out. Locked the doors, followed the Home Guard, crossed the street, down into the tube and been fine. Safe. Bob's your uncle. Tickity boo.

But I was sick to death of the cramped hours and days spent down in the Underground with nothing to do. And what about Y for Yeats, William Butler? What about W for Wordsworth, William, and T for Tennyson, Alfred Lord?

How could I call myself a librarian and leave them here? For the Jerrys to destroy. The sirens were still blaring and the great booms had begun. Different from the library doors booming shut, that was familiar, comforting. These booms were awful, great, earthshaking booms, booms that meant something had been destroyed. *BOOM*. It brought me to my senses, and I thought it would be good to go. Really *very* good to go.

I *just* had to take a few. The Blitz had been going for weeks now and there were always so many people in the Underground – and that handsome second lieutenant who so loved his poetry might be there – and I thought maybe this time if I could just grab some poems it would do them all some good. *BOOM*.

I snatched W for Wordsworth, William, and T for Tennyson, Alfred Lord and S for Shelly, Percy Bysshe. *BOOM*. Shakespeare, William, and Sidney, Phillip, and Rossetti Christina, and Pope, Alexander and Milton, John. *BOOM*. I was excited. I was efficient. My heart throbbed and my hands flew over the shelves as I frantically grabbed at Marvell and Marlowe and Kipling and Keats. *BOOM*. The bombs were coming faster now, louder and closer. But I needed only a few seconds more. If this time was the end and those book-burning Jerrys came and decided to have a grand old time, they wouldn't get their hands on these. They could start in Modern Fiction. Heaven knows how much of that is rubbish anyhow. But they wouldn't touch my poems.

*BOOM*.

Johnson.

*BOOM*.

Hardy.

*BOOM*.

Eliot.

*BOOM*.

I turned to go. I always liked Eliot. But I could feel that time was pressing. I started to make for the door. And yet how could I leave Eliot behind when his words are so decidedly modern. Modern, and Christian at the same time. If that's even possible. And in the wake of this war I am not feeling very Christian. I have questions, you see, questions for God about war. So if someone can be modern and Christian, I thought it might be important, really very important, to bring him along. And that handsome second lieutenant had taken him out three times in a row. I reached up and grasped for Eliot. And then the big crash came.

*The sound of the BOOM. And the sound of a crash: rubble and books falling as a bomb hits the library and the ceiling of the library caves in.*

ELIOT (recording): *At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,*

*Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline.*

LIBRARIAN: I almost left but I turned back for Eliot. Foolish, perhaps, but that's what I did.

He writes, you know, about being in between things. Which I suppose, at this moment, I am. And I suppose, at *that* moment, I *was*. What had happened? And where was I? I feel around myself. I appear to be...still alive. I appear to be...still in one piece. And yet I can't really *see* anything. It isn't light. It isn't dark. Ah yes, the dust. There is so much dust around me. It has coated everything. I wipe it from my eyes. And I am...on the floor? Yes, on the floor. How strange! How did I get here? Oh yes, the booms. Oh yes, the bombs. And the books? Where are the books?

The books were all around me. Some of them had cushioned my fall. Some of them had fallen on me. And one was in my hand. The library had been hit, you see, and part of it had fallen down, nearly right on top of me. But there I was...I could move my hands. And in the not-light-not-darkness of the rising dust, I could see...what was it that I held? Ah yes. Eliot, T.S. Yes. Of course. Very well, Bob's your uncle, things are all right.

Well no, no, they aren't. There is one problem. It seems I can't move my legs. They are pinned, really *quite* pinned, beneath a bookshelf that, it appears, has fallen on me. Not British poetry, no. No, it was the shelf from behind me...that would be...what? The French, the French poets, wouldn't you know. A rather formidable shelf of R for Rimbaud, Arthur, and H for Hugo, Victor, and B for Baudelaire, Charles toppled by a piece of what once had been the ceiling. And resting on top of my legs. Well, crushing them, really. And what is that? Something wet, warm, underneath me. Ah yes, blood. Really, quite a *bit* of blood. Well. So. It appears that I am dying.

Right then.

So. Here I am, *in the middle way*, dying in the library, pinned by Rimbaud and only Eliot to save me. *How should I begin?* How does one go about the business of dying? Alone. In a library.

Eliot wrote the Four Quartets during the Blitz, you know. Well, three of them. He wrote the last three during the Blitz, but the first one, *Burnt Norton*, he wrote in 1935, and the volume in which it was published was what I held in my hands. *And should I then presume?*

I'm frightened.

I open the book. And – look – the first passage, it's been underlined, in pencil, in a neat, steady hand. I read.

*"Time present and time past*

*Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation.”*

What might have been. Yes, that’s nice. What might have been if I had followed the others out the door. I might have made it safely down to the tube in time. I might have stumbled and bumped into the second lieutenant with the horn-rimmed glasses, taken his arm, asked him his name. Now it is only an abstraction. “An abstraction remaining a perpetual possibility only in a world of speculation.”

I feel like I should be able to move my legs but I can’t and it is quite unsettling. Really, *very* disconcerting. I am beginning to feel quite cold. Another passage underlined! As the librarian I should abhor the disfigurement of my books. Against library policy. But in this moment, it makes me feel a little less alone. I read:

*“Words move, music moves  
Only in time; but that which is only living  
Can only die.”*

That which is only living is only I. I, here, alone, trapped in the library. Trapped in the library by my own stupidity, my own insane temerity, and by my books. I never chastised that second lieutenant for his underlining. Couldn’t bring myself to open my mouth. And now, by chance or providence, I have his underlined book here in my hands. Keeping me company, as I die alone.

I’m cold. So I focus on the words. Eliot wrote them. The second lieutenant underlined them. He checked out the book three times in a row. I remember. And now I have it here in my hands. I hold it to me, grasp its firm solidity, clutch it tightly to my chest. It anchors me. I read:

*“Love is itself unmoving,  
Only the cause and end of movement,  
Timeless, and undesiring  
Except in the aspect of time  
Caught in the form of limitation  
Between un-being and being.”*

I feel it now. *Here. Now. Always.* In this moment, in this library. Yes, there it is, the “form of limitation” that is my body, as the great, cold, numbness starts to wash over me. I feel the sense of being limited, of being caught, of being anchored. Not just physically, literally, which I am, I *am* caught here under the bookshelves. But also spiritually. Anchored here in this world – caught between the underlining second lieutenant with the

horn-rimmed glasses whose name I failed ever to ask – and something else, something different, something *still*, which flickers...stilly...just beyond my grasp. In order to reach it, I'll have to let go. I don't want to let go. I don't want to be alone. I read:

*Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness...*

The stillness. Yes. The stillness. I can see the stillness, see it clearly, clear as day, in this moment, hanging in front of me like a ripe fruit.

*The librarian takes in the audience.*

I am not alone.

*The librarian puts down the book (lays the book at the feet of an audience member?).*

*I reach.*

*Blackout. We hear the Eliot recording:*

ELIOT:  
*Only through time time is conquered.*