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The Revival of Myth: Allusions and Symbols in The Waste Land

By Lauren Haas

T.S. Eliot is quoted to have once said that modern poets must find "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." In *The Waste Land*, Eliot exemplifies this idea that amidst a chaotic contemporary society, a poet's prose attempt order.

By writing *The Waste Land*, Eliot gave public voice to his concerns about a derelict, disjointed social morality wanting of rebirth. By reviving myth in literature, Eliot offered his society its own revival by journeying back to the impetus of myth for remedies to societal ills. Joyce Leavell, one of Eliot's poetic brethren has said, "The assumption of the mythical method is that our culture and language once had a pervasive meaningfulness which has been lost in our increasingly rational and discontinuous society, but that by recovering the lost myth from within our culture, poets can restore mythic unity to literature." Through his use of myth in *The Waste Land*, this is precisely what Eliot achieves. Myth both offers a glimpse into the human condition, with all its moral implications, and suggests remedies for moral dereliction. It offers Logos amidst Kosmos: order and unity amidst chaos. *The Waste Land* is Eliot's depiction of a shattered society, a Europe searching desperately for a spiritual direction that would restore order after the devastation of war. Eliot wrote about times that were vacant and wasteful. This same perception is evident within *The Waste Land*.

The book proffers a mythic experience of kings and heroes. The setting and characters of *The Waste Land* exist within the mind of the poem's speaker Tiresius, the hermaphroditic sage of

classical mythology. Eliot's poem presents his commentary concerning the condition of post-World War I European society. He saw the chaos and turmoil of his society as it futilely sought meaning and order. Eliot employs the myth of *The Fisher King* to symbolize his morally barren society.

In tandem with a variety of other mythical allusions, *The Fisher King* is a fertility myth on which *The Waste Land* is based. The myth is about a kingdom left barren when a curse is placed upon its king by way of a castration wound. The Fisher King sits fishing without yield in his Waste Land and guards the Holy Grail. To restore the kingdom's land to fruition and the king to fertility again, a noble hero must fulfill a challenge by recovering the grail, and, therefore, proving his heroism, so the Fisher King can be healed and the land rejuvenated. *The Waste Land* offers a meditation on death and a reflection on that which was lost. The world was slowly withering away like the cursed kingdom of the Fisher King. The Fisher King has lost everything and sits contemplating his once rich kingdom. Throughout his depression and loss, there is still some hope that what was lost can be regained. The Fisher King can be redeemed and healed if only some great hero will save him. There is no sign of hope in the Waste Land, there is merely the grief and decay of society and its values.

Yet, *The Waste Land* incorporates a panoply of mythical allusions and symbols in addition to its parallel to the myth of *The Fisher King*. Another prominent allusion is to Greek mythology and the figure of Tiresius, in whose mind the poem takes place. Through Tiresius, the blind hermaphroditic prophet, all men and all women in the poem come together as one: "I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between

two lives/Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see" the future (lines 218-9). Tiresius is a unifying, fluid and amorphous mythic element in *The Waste Land*.

In addition to Greek mythical allusions, several Biblical allusions are made in *The Waste Land*. Although Westerners may not think of Biblical stories as myth, they are indeed a form of myth - they just happen to be the foundation of current reigning Western beliefs, as well. Myths are created for the purpose of belief in some reasonable explanation of life and its different aspects. Thus, in some cultural and historical context, each myth has had its place and its set of believers.

In Section III, *The Fire Sermon*, Eliot alludes to a passage of Psalms: "By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept" (line 182). According to the footnotes, this passage from Psalms refers to the time when the Hebrews were weeping after having been exiled from their homeland. This is simply one example of his many uses of Biblical symbolism.

This section is entitled *Fire Sermon* in reference to another mythical tradition: Buddhism. Interestingly, this important sermon Buddha gave corresponds to the Christian Sermon on the Mount. Thus, within *The Waste Land* the ubiquitous cross-cultural parallels of myth emerge. Buddha declared in his sermon that everything is on fire due to passion and hatred. Eliot writes in this section, "Burning burning burning burning/O Lord Thou pluckest me out/O Lord Thou pluckest/Burning (lines 308-11). Here, as in Buddha's sermon, everything is on fire. The speaker supplicates god to pluck him from his fiery terror just as he had Joshua in the book of Zechariah, another Biblical allusion. This reference is appropriate for a commentary on the moral ills of European society perhaps fueled in part by burning hatred and misguided passion.

Throughout the innumerable dawns and dusks of humanity, throughout all the fire and peace, a common trend or a common nature has sustained: human nature. From the ancient Greco-Roman and Eastern myths, to the pagan rituals of the Celts, to the modern-day Western traditions, a common thread has tied together all of humanity. Through individual quest and exploration people learn the character, texture, and color of such a thread. For, therein lies meaning and understanding. It is the thread of the impenetrable and indelible human condition of every individual, in whatever form it takes. Amidst the darkest oppression and the brightest felicity, there dwells the human condition, the human mind, with its ability to think, dream and imagine into existence a scope of thoughts as deep as the heavens. Behind each face, each mask as the case might be, is the mind of the tragic hero, the star-crossed lover, the healing mother or the madman about to die, untouchable by any but the individual who wears that mask.

Mythology illuminates the common denominator among humans. Myths are anthropocentric and invite interpretation. They exemplify the human condition. This is why they are so engaging. They are woven with that thread of humanity in which every individual finds a fiber of consistency. Rooted in Logos, in language and order, myth is born of humanity and through its common denominator offers unity for humanity as for individual societies. In each character, in each classic novel or myth, some certain human qualities emerge. Somehow, they all speak of that human condition from within. The outward shapes of stories and myths, the people and places and things, do not seem to matter as much in comparison. The underlying collectivity of human nature again surfaces as a common thread.

We cannot get rid of that human condition within us that keeps us thinking and feeling and questioning. It is what makes us alike and it is what makes us different. From that common base stems innumerable, valuable variations of culture and different types of individuals. Mythology is a study of existence. Myths provide sundry interpretive value for the ways in which humanity assembles a sense of purpose for its existence. Myth offers a glimpse into the spiritual collectivity of people throughout time all over the world. In doing so, a myth speaks to the meaning people since genesis have stamped upon life. Thus, one myth examining being and existence offers a common interpretation of the ways in which people perceive their existence. In reviving myth in literature, Eliot and his contemporaries understood all this richness contained in mythic tradition. Whether it is an ancient Greco-Roman tradition, an old Eastern tradition or a current Western tradition, myth takes its place in literature, culture and life as a guiding and unifying element to which all of humanity relates. Even as societies grow, evolve and change drastically, the most fundamental human condition remains steadfast as exemplified by its manifestations in myth.

All textual citations are from *The Norton*

Anthology of English Literature,

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