

Revisiting the Mythic Method in Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

Eliot's *The Waste Land* has a special position in the history of English poetry. It is one of the most talked about poems of the 20th century. The poem is written in five parts and often called, poem in five fragments; but all the parts are connected with the theme of disillusionment of a generation and futility of modern life. The poem became famous due to the ground-breaking techniques that poet used to convey his message. The poetry in his era was traditional in theme and style, showing no changes of innovation. Most of the poems focussed on nature imagery and rural setting. Eliot with his poem provided a new breath of air to the dying poetry of English and applied avant-garde techniques to infuse a modernist trend into it. Due to such efforts poetry came out from old-aged techniques and touched new heights. The poem draws much of its symbolism and narrative framework from the mythological story of the quest for the Holy Grail, the Sacred Cup that Jesus Christ drank from at the Last Supper. The present paper looks at the use of mythic method in the poem and its significance in connecting past to the present.

Keywords: Avant-garde, Mythic Method, Fragments, Narrative Framework.

Introduction

The term 'myth' has in the Greek word 'mythos', which means a story. Myth normally refers, "to the ancient tales, mostly of heroism, romance and war, which different races have cherished over the ages. These are the symbolic projections of a people's hopes, values, fears and aspirations" (Malik 71). Alan W. Watts defines the Myth, "a complex of stories-some no doubt fact and some fantasy-which for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life" (7). Myths are found in every nook and corner of the world, which act as a binding force for tribes or nations and reconnect them with their culture, religion and so on. They transcend time and unite the past and present of any cultural collective. Every culture has its own distinctive mythology which is reflected in legends, anecdotes and even the thinking of the group. Myths take their specific form from the cultural environments in which they grow. Moreover, similar motifs may be found in different myths. Certain images that recur in the myths of people widely separated time and place tend to have a common meaning.

In a very similar manner, we can investigate the mythological elements in *The Waste Land*. In his very first note to the poem, Eliot explicitly speaks of how much he is indebted to Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, saying: "Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem

were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance*" (The Metaphysics 21). Eliot has used many allusions in *The Waste Land* and has drawn it from many resources like religion, literature and tradition. In addition to this the poet has taken the help of myths to bring novelty in his poems. The method has been termed as "mythic method". The poet has used the method in order to convey the message and reconnect the present with the past. Eliot has mentioned Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Miss Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, especially the latter, as the source of the mythical framework in the poem. The myth in the background is a Grail legend which describes how the hero of virgin purity, during his pursuit of the Holy Grail reaches the kingdom of the Fisher King, who has become impotent under the curse arising from the wanton violation of the sanctity of sex and surrender to lust. The impotency of the ruler is reflected in the sterility of his drought-laden kingdom, which has become a universe of death. But there is a hope for rebirth in the belief that someday the kingdom would be visited by a knight of immaculate purity who would visit the Grail temple in it, known as the Chapel Perilous, will answer the questions and then perform the ritual washing of the king's person to restore it to health and vitality which will be signaled by the refreshing shower of rain, herald of the new dry land. Other notes bring more and more sources into play, of many different origins and each affecting the meaning and structure by adding to the complexity of the destination poem and at the same time preserving a relative independence that makes surface fragmentation more obvious but also that helps bring the whole array together. The epigraph to *The Waste Land* foreshadows the poem's dramatic development. It is adopted from Petronius' *Satyricon*, and the Roman connection becomes important in the context of what is to follow. It works at once as a confirmation of the continuations in the European literary tradition and as a commentary on the fall of civilizations. Cumaeen Sibyl is introduced as the first oracular figure of the poem. Oracular and prophetic figures appear throughout the narrative, they are a reemerging character type. Sibyl's situation presents the topic of life which is undesired. She is suspended in a negative, inactive state of being. She expresses longing for death future and proclaims, "I want to die." This wish can be assigned directly to Sibyl – as a clairvoyant, she sees no possibility for improvement in the future, and refuses to continue her current existence. Or the statement may be taken as a prophecy of an inspired oracle who mediates the will of a god. In that case, the words speak about renewal through death. Sibyl introduces the idea of the ritual of death and resurrection. There can be drawn a parallel between oracular prophet and oracular poet, both of whom are considered to be endowed with divine vision. The nature of the sacrifice required for the renewal of life is revealed throughout the course of *The Waste Land*. The situation of Sibyl is akin to Eliot who has found himself surrounded by decayed and immoral culture where he feels suffocation, despite living in such society he wants to come out of it and live a life in a society where spirituality has its place. The myth of Vegetation is based on nature, particularly on the cycle of season, "April is the cruellest month, breeding lilacs out the dead land." In the same way the author uses the myths of Tiresias, a son of shepherd, seven year blind transfer in to women by Hara. He is represented as a bisexual in the poem as he was blind but he has the gift of prophecy and immortality. Phlebas- symbolises the chance of renewal in the waste land an etc.

It is believed that he got to know about this method from James Joyce's work *Ulysses*. Joyce has employed this method in many other works like *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where he employs the myth of Daedalus:

An artist who is exiled after his attempted murder of his nephew Perdix, who he feared would surpass his ability. He flees to Crete where he becomes the architect, artist, and craftsman for king Minos. He is the one responsible for creating the wooden bull for the queen Pasiphae so she can slake her lust for the divine white bull who was a gift from the god Poseidon to King Minos. It is he who builds the labyrinth by creating wings of wax for his son Icarus and himself. After he escapes, he lives a long and fruitful life in the land of Sicily. (Cotterell 36)

Joyce uses the myth to draw a comparison between the main character of novel Stephen Dedalus and Daedalus an artist, "The mythical [Daedalus] was imprisoned in a labyrinth...and escaped by inventing wings. He is a symbol therefore, not only of the rebel who breaks out of his prison. But of the inventor who creates the instrument of his escape. He is both man and artist" (Drew 62). Stephen the protagonist of the novel "seeks to transcend the conditions of the world around him. Issues of national identity, dogmatic spiritual identity, and familial ensnarements represent the symbolic towers from which he must escape" (Eliot applauded Joyce). The development of Stephen as a character constantly in search of a way out and in search of his own labyrinth, throughout the novel we see he tries to escape from the labyrinth of religion and structure of school, turned to secular ideology and had couple of sexual encounters, then again entered the same labyrinth (religion) that he had earlier left. Thus, he in continuous process of coming out of one labyrinth and entering into another one.

A year after that, in 1923, Eliot published his review "*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*", in which he introduced his "mythic method": where he admired the Joyce's use of myth for showing similarities between and differences between the ancient and the contemporary. Eliot called it "the most expression of the present age". He wrote, "Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. He was referring to the "mythic style" rather than conventional narrative style"(qtd in Mingus). As evident by the writing, T.S. Eliot has a profound appreciation for the use of myth as a point of departure for maintaining a cultural or historical perspective. In *The Waste Land* his employment of myth is not simply an allusive and metaphorical tactic, but rather an attempt at relating his own ideas and tropes to universals in order to establish some external order for the chaos he is presenting. According to Roma Shrestha:

The Waste Land is essentially the spiritual experience of man; it has to be related to its background. In the world of today, one cannot ignore the social, secular, commercial and technical compulsions of the modern world. Eliot has referred to the past in order to show the similarity of the problems of both ages and how the experience of the past can help in finding solutions of the problems of our time."

It, no doubt, deals with the tragedy of modern age, but it also shows that tragedy is at the heart of life, all life, in all ages. The past and the present are telescoped, and it is thus shown that what is happening in the present age did also happen in the past.

Conclusion

The poem is fine example of the basic technique of the mythical method which makes us surpass both time and space by making us swing in time and space so that we can cover the immense vastness of human consciousness and realize the grim intensity of the human feeling of pain and hope and also feel, in ourselves, the universal and timeless tragic situation of man and his life. Eliot has intertwined many mythical strands in order to form a complex traditional background to explain the nature and measure the depth of the spiritual waste land which is 'contemporary history'. Thus, Eliot's method is allusive, polyphonic, and above all assimilative. It unites archetypal concepts and modern realities. The poet describes the decline of civilization and expresses an innate desire for revival. Eliot uses the mythical method to reinvent the primitive myth of death and rebirth in the contemporary circumstances.

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