

Grover Smith: On "The Waste Land"

The Waste Land summarizes the Grail legend, not precisely in the usual order, but retaining the principal incidents and adapting them to a modern setting. Eliot's indebtedness both to Sir James Frazer and to Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (in which book he failed to cut pages 138-39 and 142-43 of his copy) is acknowledged in his notes. Jessie L. Weston's thesis is that the Grail legend was the surviving record of an initiation ritual. Later writers have reaffirmed the psychological validity of the link between such ritual, phallic religion, and the spiritual content of the Greek Mysteries. Identification of the Grail story with the common myth of the hero assailing a devil-dragon underground or in the depths of the sea completes the unifying idea behind *The Waste Land*. The Grail legend corresponds to the great hero epics, it dramatizes initiation into maturity, and it bespeaks a quest for sexual, cultural, and spiritual healing. Through all these attributed functions, it influenced Eliot's symbolism.

Parallels with yet other myths and with literary treatments of the "quest" theme reinforce Eliot's pattern of death and rebirth. Though *The Tempest*, one of Eliot's minor sources, scarcely depicts an initiation "mystery," Colin Still, in a book of which Eliot has since written favorably (Shakespeare's *Mystery Play*), had already advanced the theory in 1921 that it implies such a subject." And Tiresias is not simply the Grail knight and the Fisher King but Ferdinand and Prospero, as well as Tristan and Mark, Siegfried and Wotan. In his feminine role he is not simply the Grail-maiden and the wise Kundry but the sibyl, Dido, Miranda, Brünnhilde. Each of these represents one of the three main characters in the Grail legend and in the mystery cults--the wounded god, the sage woman (transformed in some versions of the Grail legend into a beautiful maiden), and the resurrected god, successful quester, or initiate. Counterparts to them figure elsewhere; Eliot must have been conscious that the "Ancient Mariner" and "Childe Roland" had analogues to his own symbolism.

In adopting fertility symbolism, Eliot was probably influenced by Stravinsky's ballet *Le Sacre du printemps*. The summer before writing *The Waste Land* he saw the London production, and on reviewing it in September he criticized the disparity between Massine's choreography and the music. He might almost have been sketching his own plans for a work applying a primitive idea to contemporary life:

In art there should be interpenetration and metamorphosis. Even the *Golden Bough* can be read in two ways: as a collection of entertaining myths, or as a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation. In everything in the *Sacre du Printemps*, except in the music, one missed the sense of the present. Whether Stravinsky's music be permanent or ephemeral I do not know; but it did seem to transform the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life; and to transform these despairing noises into music.

In *The Waste Land* he imposed the fertility myth upon the world about him.

Eliot's waste land suffers from a dearth of love and faith. It is impossible to demarcate precisely at every point between the physical and the spiritual symbolism of the poem; as in "Gerontion" the speaker associates the failure of love with his spiritual dejection. It is clear enough, however, that the contemporary waste land is not, like that of the romances, a realm of sexless sterility. The argument emerges that in a world that makes too much of the physical and too little of the spiritual relations between the sexes, Tiresias, for whom love and sex must form a unity, has been ruined by his inability to unify them. The action of the poem, as Tiresias recounts it, turns thus on two crucial incidents: the garden scene in Part I and the approach to the Chapel Perilous in Part V. The one is the traditional initiation in the presence of the Grail; the other is the mystical initiation, as described by Jessie L. Weston, into spiritual knowledge. The first, if successful, would constitute rebirth through love and sex; the second, rebirth without either. Since both fail, the quest fails, and the poem ends with a formula for purgatorial suffering, through which Tiresias may achieve the second alternative after patience and self-denial--perhaps after physical death. The counsel to give, sympathize, and control befits one whom direct ways to beatitude cannot release from suffering.

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