

A Therapeutic Study on *The Waste Land* from Mythical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot writes about the spiritual disillusionment of modern waste landers in his long poem *The Waste Land*. This makes it possible for scholars to explore in the poem the spiritual resonance among the readers, and the poem from a broader perspective of spiritual life, instead of being confined to the historic or social territory. The paper examines the poem's therapeutic function as well as the poet's curative philosophy, based on a close reading of *The Waste Land* and Eliot's poetic treatise from mythical perspective. The mythical therapy consists of the diagnosis of symptoms and treatment of spiritual illness. The diagnosis is conducted through the parallel between the futile and sex-without-love modern life and the various negative archetypes which disclose the destructiveness of lust. The treatment of diseases is carried out through the juxtaposition of positive archetypes and the fragmented modern spirit. The paper concludes that the therapy works effectively in the poem heal the spiritual illness of modern people.

Keywords: *The Waste Land, Myth, Therapeutic study.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The epigraph in *The Waste Land* vividly depicts the life-in-death Sybil's longing for death in a cage. "For I once saw with my own eyes the Cumean Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her, 'Sibyl, what do you want?' she answered, 'I want to die' ... The Sibyl, one of a number of prophetic figures so named in ancient times, is confined to a jar because her body threatens to deliquesce. Granted a wish by Apollo, she had asked for as many years of life as there are grains in a handful of sand, but she forgot to ask for eternal youth as well" (North 3). Sybil is the representative of the waste landers in the modern age. Her longing for death may well be understood as the desire for the renewal of spiritual life, that is, the medicine to cure the life-in-death spiritual illness.

Eliot is interested in myth and rituals. He reads a large quantity of field anthropologists, sociologists and social psychologists and his interest in their work could be dated back to his academic days in Harvard University, when he focuses on psychology with special interests in myths and mythic invention, and above all in its speculations about the primitive thought. Such

academic experience of the poet in myth has been noted by Jewel Spears Brooker in his article "Mimetic Desire and the Return to Origins in *The Waste Land*",

T. S. Eliot, however, absorbed it from his superb education in philosophy and the social sciences. Between 1911 and 1914, as a student in Harvard University's doctoral program, he took a number of seminars in myth, philosophy, and religion, and it is clear from his papers in the Eliot Collection at Harvard that he not only absorbed, but also criticized the work of such masters as Frazer, Tylor Durkheim, and Lévy-Bruhl. (130-1)

Eliot's interest in myth and ancient rituals is intelligently practical, and he wants to use them for his own creative purpose: to borrow the ancient forms and ideas and piece them together for his own poetry, because he believes the modern world calls for a new form in poetry. A myth contains the experience of a cultural past, so the mythic experience is synthesized in *The Waste Land* when the ancient myths are woven into a modern psyche. "In creating his image of an interior world and projecting it as an outward landscape of events, Eliot made a multiplicity of details into myth

different from all other myth ... When Eliot's poetry borrows, the adoptions form a new equilibrium" (Smith 53). His allusions to the archetypal stories in the anthropological works, like *From Ritual to Romance* and *The Golden Bough*, work together to form a new poem *The Waste Land*, a healing poem which helps the waste landers to pass through spiritual death to a rebirth.

2. T.S. ELIOT AND MYTHS

How to select a myth for his poem? In 1921, as he was writing *The Waste Land*, Eliot explained that the selection of a myth was not random, but was directed by one's point of view, one's self-image, and one's desires. "The myth that a man makes has transformations according to as he sees himself as a hero or villa ... Man desires to see himself ... as more admirable, more forceful, more villainous, more comical, more despicable ... than he actually is. [A myth] is not composed of abstract qualities; it is a point of view, transmitted to importance" (Rainey 141-143). And the poet's conscious use of the myth is a means of serving his own purpose, that is, to heal the broken spirit and suffering souls of the modern people. In order to realize this goal in his poetry, he is urging the readers to switch their mechanical way of appreciating the poetry to a new way, by which they resonate with invigorating words in his poetry,

He was so conscious of what, for him, poetry was for, that he could not altogether see it for what it is. And I am not sure that he was highly sensitive to the musical qualities of verse. His own occasional bad lapses arouse the suspicion; and so far as I can recollect he never emphasizes this virtue of poetic style, this fundamental, in his criticism. (The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism 118-9)

By comparing poetry to music, the poet asks the readers to stop exploring the abstract ideas in poetry, because the experience of fusion, of division and multiplicity are reduced to a spiritual unity, which is the essence of the poetry. So, in order to bring back their lost spiritual vitality, they should penetrate below the consciousness of minds and sink to the primitive. According to Eliot, the primitive mind is essential for people to live a healthy mental and spiritual life, while the civilized mind is detrimental to their mentality. In the "primitive" mind, each person fully belongs to the same organic community whose universe is thoroughly integrated by means of unblocked communication between past and present, seen and

unseen, objective and subjective, thought and thing, human and nonhuman. Consciousness, perception, memory, and expression all participate in modes of mental functioning that depend less on logic than on harmonic patterns. With the growth of so-called "civilization," this state of mankind gives way to a very different state in which each is divided in his own sensibilities. The highly civilized person is divided both within himself and in his relationship to the world around him. Being civilized means a weakening of memory and a loss of mystical perception. In order to enable the modern people to gain their spiritual vitality and integrate their divided sensibilities, the poet needs to activate people's primitive state of mind with the mythical poems. In his concluding chapter of *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot provides a note to his idea of how to bring back people's passionate experience in the past and reminds us of the poet's role as a mediator integrating the primitive mind and the modern civilized mind, "the pre-logical mentality persists in civilized man, but becomes available only to or through the poet" (148). He draws his final remarks to a close with some anthropological speculations: "Poetry begins, I dare say, with a savage beating a drum in a jungle, and it retains that essential of percussion and rhythm: hyperbolically one might say that the poet is older than other human beings" (152-5). Eliot's point is that the poet's work is to keep the eternal percussion and rhythm — the primitive elements of the poem echoed in the readers' mind. He then details the poet's job as "return[ing] to the sources", that is, in order to understand the civilized mind, they need to make good use of the "primitive art and poetry" in their poems.

As it is certain that some study of primitive man furthers our understanding of civilized man, so it is certain that primitive art and poetry help our understanding of civilized art and poetry. Primitive art and poetry can even, through the studies and experiments of the artist or poet, revivify the contemporary activities. The maxim, return to the sources, is a good one, M[m]ore intelligibly put, it is that the poet should know everything that has been accomplished in poetry (accomplished, not merely produced) since its beginnings in order to know what he is doing himself. He should be aware of all the metamorphoses of poetry that illustrate the stratifications of history that cover savagery. For the artist is, in an impersonal sense, the most conscious of men; he is therefore the most and the least civilized and civilizable; he is the most

competent to understand both civilized and primitive. ("War-Paint and Feathers" 1036)

Thus, to expose the sterile and disintegrated spirit and to reveal the necessity of spiritual regeneration are the general duty of the poet. The origin of poetry resides simultaneously in prehistory, primitive rites, and primitive minds, which are indistinguishable from contemporary notions of the collective unconsciousness. Eliot may have in mind Jung's *Psychology of the Unconscious* (1912) when he works on the essay. Because Eliot's understanding of the primitive minds, the primitive art and poetry in the above remarks, and his descriptions of the recurring images in the following passage actually resonate with Carl Jung's primordial images stemming from the collective unconsciousness,

*Why, for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others? The song of one bird, the leap of one fish, at a particular place and time, the scent of one flower, an old woman on a German mountain path, six ruffians seen through an open window playing cards at night at a small French railway junction where there was a water-mill. Such memories may have symbolic value, but of what we cannot tell, for they come to represent the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer. We might just as well ask why, when we try to recall visually some period in the past, we find in our memory just the few meagre arbitrarily chosen set of snapshots that we do find there, the faded poor souvenirs of passionate moments. (Eliot, *The use of poetry and the Use of Criticism* 148)*

These recurring images with "the faded poor souvenirs of passionate moments" we recall in the past can represent the "depths of feeling". "We cannot peer into" them because these images reside in people's deeper psyche, which is termed as the collective unconsciousness by Jung. When Eliot creates such poems with the recurring images from the deeper part of human beings' mind, he provides the readers with certain remedy for their corrupted consciousness and the drained civilized minds, which functions just like the nourishing water to a thirsty mouth in the desert or the thrush hermit's healing song to a dried mind. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, with its abundant primordial images, activates the readers' memories in the passionate past, and offers them one way out of their spiritual sterility and degeneration.

The poem's therapeutic possibility from the collective unconsciousness perspective has been referred to by the poet as well as many literary critics. Then, how does the poem work heal the fragmented spirit of modern people? What is the mythical therapeutic philosophy lying behind *The Waste Land*?

The mythical therapy consists of the diagnosis of symptoms and treatment of spiritual illness. The diagnosis is conducted through the parallel between the futile and sex-without-love modern life and the various negative archetypes which disclose the destructiveness of lust. The treatment of diseases is carried out through the juxtaposition of positive archetypes and the fragmented modern spirit.

3. DIAGNOSIS OF DISEASE

Eliot believes that to heal the broken minds of modern people, the writes first of all should know why they suffer. Then further steps can be taken to search for the cure based on this knowledge. As he states in the essay "Baudelaire" (1930), people "could not escape suffering and could not transcend it, so he attracted pain to himself. But what he could do, with that immense passive strength and sensibilities which no pain could impair, was to study his suffering ... such suffering as Baudelaire's implies the possibility of a positive state of beatitude" (*Selected Essays* 385). Eliot indeed takes efforts to "study" modern people's suffering in his poetry.

Through the parallel between various mythical archetypes and the frustrated modern spiritual lives, the causes of the waste landers' spiritual illness have been diagnosed as excessive lust and moral degeneration, which lead them to a spiritual death eventually. The whole of his early verse may be regarded as a succession of *The Waste Land* which sketches and studies modern people's suffering from morbid emotions and fragmented spirit, first with a gentle irony in Prufrock, pretending to be merely a minor poet with a disillusioned eye for the unreal emotions of others, then with deepening intensity in "Gerontion" and growing savagery in the Sweeney poems. Failure in love, sex and emotional life, seems to be the unavoidable theme and his major concern at least in his early poems. Modern people's spirit and minds seem to suffer severely from their morbid emotional life due to either the excessive lusts or the apathetic emotions, which will eventually lead to a watery death or death in fire spiritually. To provide the modern people with a kind of spiritual heal, the poet's

primary task is to diagnose the symptoms of their spiritual suffering and expose their problems through the method of juxtaposing the negative primordial images with the infertile modern spirit in *The Waste Land*, attempting to call up modern people's consciousness of their misconduct through their echoes with the archetypes in the deepest part of their psyche.

4. TREATMENT OF DISEASE

Eliot's treatment of modern people's spiritual and emotional illness with myth in *The Waste Land* mainly is achieved through building a kind of connection between the modern and the ancient, the evil and the good through contrast. Once the channel is cleared, the past can inform and give significance to the present through resonance. Eliot has stated the method quite explicitly in his essay "Baudelaire",

Baudelaire has perceived that what distinguishes the relations of man and woman from the copulation of beasts is the knowledge of Good and Evil... Having an imperfect, vague romantic conception of Good, he was at least able to understand that the sexual act as evil is more dignified, less boring, than as the natural, life-giving, cheery automatism of the modern world. (Selected Essays 390)

People's spiritual or mental illness on *The Waste Land* lies in the fact that they have long lost the knowledge of what is good and what is evil, which keeps them from being alive in their spiritual world. Having a "vague" knowledge of Good and Evil is more alive than having involuntary thought of them. This knowledge or awareness will help them avoid the evil or immoral and stick to the good or the moral in their romantic relations, and thus keep their spirit away from the life-in-death mire. People on the waste land suffer bitterly in their emotional or spiritual world just because they fail to possess such knowledge. Just as the spokesman of the waste landers, Sybil says: "I wish to die", people who inhabit the waste land wish to die due to their drained spiritual lives. As a result, the poet tries to offer a kind of cure to them by reviving such knowledge in their consciousness. He reveals the good and the evil, life and death for modern people through various archetypes in the poem, with an aim to activate the vigorous energy in people's unconscious mind (knowledge of Good and Evil), which in turn can heal their repressed and fragmented spirit. The poet achieves this therapeutic goal by building *The Waste Land* on

major contrasting primordial images of Good and Evil, of two kinds of lives and two kinds of death. Life without meaning is death; sacrificial death is life-giving to a new life with genuine love. Eliot highly values the idea of contrast something good with something evil and illustrates it in his remarks on Strawinsky's opera,

The Vegetation Rite upon which the ballet is founded remained, in spite of the music, a pageant of primitive culture ... Strawinsky's music ... did seem to transform the rhythm of the steps 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. (North132-3)

Eliot believes Strawinsky's music is remarkable in that it combines such two contrasted issues in his opera, as the musical "rhythm" of all morbid events in modern life and primitive culture on which the ballet is founded. The ballet presents the vegetation rites from *The Golden Bough*. The contrast between infertile modern spirit, displayed through "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 fertile spiritual life in ancient times, presented through vegetation ceremony, is therefore established in Strawinsky's play, and serves as a piece of entertainment as well as a cure for the depressed consciousness of the audience.

Eliot painstakingly employs such contrast in *The Waste Land* as a way to heal the broken minds and drained spirit of the waste landers. As Spurr points out, "*The Waste Land* presents primitive ritual not as an escape but as a lost origin of order and meaning. The formal order of ancient fertility rites and vegetation ceremonies is recovered, if rearranged, in the formal order of the poem so as to impose meaning on contemporary history's panorama of futility and anarchy" (Spurr 271). The poet's prescription to such spiritual diseases is positive prototypes, which consist of such healthy and divine spirit as a sense of chastity in emotional relations and sacrificing life for genuine love. By way of resonance with the dynamic energy released from the positive prototypes, people gain the spiritual vigor deep from their collective unconsciousness, which enables them to get their bad nerves relieved and their divided spirit integrated.

5. CONCLUSION

Eliot dives deeper into the region of the collective unconsciousness in search of a solution to the modern people's spiritual and mental problems exposed in *The Waste Land*. Recoiling from the unsatisfying present, the poet reaches out to the primordial images in the unconsciousness that are best fitted to compensate for the barrenness and one-sidedness of the modern spirit in his time. Though the waste landers' denial of the Dog in the garden of vegetation gods reveals their hesitant attitude toward their spiritual rebirth, the myths do work effectively to solve many of their spiritual problems.

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