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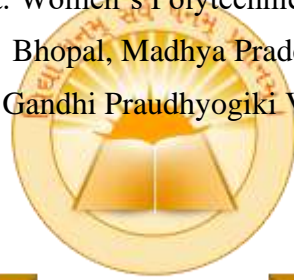
## **The Mythical Method in the Waste Land**

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### **Abstract**

E.M. Forster wrote of Eliot's religion, 'What he seeks is not revelation but stability'. The quest for stability is central to Eliot's work. The social and personal agony of *The Wasteland* and the individual agony of 'Prufrock' are responses to the instability of everything. The power of the religious poems is not their faith but in the tormenting desire to believe- in the forms and dogma as much as in the Deity. When Stability is unattainable the tone becomes elegiac, as in *Prufrock* or satirical, as in the *Sweeney* poems. Desire for stability resulted in his lucid conservatism and his technical radicalism as a poet. His search for stability and a satisfactory dogma structure made him explore the world of myth, it is a barbaric world for Eliot, one agrees with Spender that "For Eliot Civilization meant the Europe of Dante with its roots in the Rome of Virgil". The ritualistic world of Indian Literature also have a similar appeal for Eliot. When Indian antiquity appears in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, it is not one of valour, violence and intrigue but one of religious awe and tender sentiments.



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## The Mythical Method in The Waste Land

As Eliot himself has confessed in his notes to the poem, the title, the plan and a good deal of the symbolism of The Waste Land are derived from Jessie L Weston's book "From Ritual to Romance" and one of the volumes of Sir Frazer's study of ancient magic and religion entitled "The Golden Bough". Miss Weston's book provided Eliot with the myth of the Holy Grail while Sir Frazer's with the fertility myth of the ancient Greek- Egyptian world. From the study of these books he realized that there is a recurrent pattern between the vegetation myth, thus there is a,

"Basic resemblance between the vegetation myths of the rebirth of the year, the fertility myths of the rebirth of the potency of man, the Christian story of the Resurrection, and the Grail legend of purification".

Eliot realized that the common source of all these myths lies in the fundamental rhythm of nature: the death and the rebirth of the year- and that their varying symbolism was an effort to explain the origin of life. He realized that in all these myths of the physical and spiritual regeneration, the symbolism is basically sexual, and that sexual perversion leads to spiritual sterility and decay. He thus discovered " *a common principle underlying all manifestations of life*" and he used this principle as a pattern to impose order and unity on the chaotic variety and complexity of his rendering of modern life. For the modern wasteland, Eliot finds several close parallels in the Wastelands of the past. The poem serves as an extraordinary bridge between the great poetic and mythic achievements of the past and the poetic necessities of the present and yet remains one of the most extended example of Eliot's use of mythical technique. It is this mythical method that has made possible the incorporation of Indian lore into The Waste Land. According to Kristian Smidt "*Eliot's interest in oriental religions is part of a wider interest in the history and the essence of all religion*". Eliot was well acquainted with the work of the leading anthropologists of the early part of our century, such as Frazer, Durkheim and Levy Bruhl. And he almost retraces in his poetry the development of human beliefs from primitive myth and ritual to the higher faiths and forms of worship.

The influence of his anthropological studies is particularly remarkable in The Waste Land. Stephen Spender is worth quoting for his lucid summing up of this influence.

*"Instead of a basis of accepted belief, the whole structure of Eliot's poem is based on certain primitive rituals and myths, which, he seems to feel, must be psychological certainties, being a part of what*



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psychologists call our 'race memory'."

He is appealing to scientific legend, where Yeats appeals to poetic legend. The authority behind *The Waste Land* is not the Catholic Church, nor romantic love, but anthropology from the volumes of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Eliot has tried to indicate, beneath the very ephemeral and violent movements of our own civilization, the gradual and magical contours of man's earliest religious beliefs. The effect he sets out to achieve is illustrated by Freud's remark in *Civilization and its Discontents* that the growth of the individual mind resembles the growth of Rome, supposing that modern Rome, as it is today, were coexistent with the buildings of Rome at every period in her history; and that beneath the modern architecture was found the architecture of every earlier period, in a perfect state of preservation.

In 1922 Eliot published *The Waste Land*, perhaps the most significant publishing event in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century apart from Joyce's *Ulysses* published the same year. It is a miniature epic of spiritual death using as its symbols, images and ideas taken from mythology and anthropology, religion and a dozen literatures and languages and dialects. The poem originally twice as long was cut to its present size on the advice of his lifelong friend Ezra Pound to whom the poem is dedicated ("*il miglior fabbro*") ,some of the cut out pieces were published later as separate poem, e.g, *Gerontion*. The poem shocked and delighted in about equal measure, and its influence on the subsequent course of modern English poetry is immeasurable.

Eliot's immediate *Waste Land* is the world, as he saw it, after the first world war. The 'waste' is not, however, that of wars, devastation and bloodshed, but the emotional and spiritual sterility of western man, the 'waste' of our civilization. The important fact that every poet and indeed every serious writer had to face in England in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was that the society in which he was living was in a very high degree hostile to the spiritual life. Perhaps it is because of this that spiritual miasma became a haunting theme with Eliot. He believed that some sort of transforming revelation was missing from modern life, and the lack had to be supplied from the artist's moments of illumination. Pound's attempts to recover Greek theophanies, like Forster's recovery of the Krishna Birth Ceremonials, were proofs that Pound and Forester desired some communal revelation on which to craft both their art and their personal lives. To all three men, but especially to Eliot primitive myths were survivals of real revelation, lacking which modern life was a travesty of true living.

Curiously however of the three only Eliot believed at least for many years that no such integrating revelations as appeared to the Greeks and Hindus could ever be recovered. What survived in the Christian



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World Eliot thought was a neurotic confusion of spiritual and sexual energies such as dramatized in his pathological "Saint Poems". "The love Song of St. Sebastian", who dies in an erotic embrace with the women he strangles, and "The death of Saint Narcissus" who (like Hesse's Siddhartha) undergoes three Buddhist incarnation into a tree, a fish, and then a young girl, but then achieves liberation under a grey rock in a ghastly erotic self-immolation. These poems are like "Gerontion" and "The Waste Land", real but despairing epiphanies revealing the death of a religious Consciousness, even while Eliot's essays were pleading for the continuity of literary tradition that included "religious feeling" in poetry. Eliot does not regard this as a single moment in history, particular to the west in the twentieth century, and the poem is organized to present an inclusive, comparative vision, a perspective of history in which (by Succinct allusions and references) twentieth century forms of belief and disbelief ,of culture and of life, are kept in a continuous and critical relationship with those of the past.

The theme of the poem is the salvation of The Waste Land, not as a certainty but a possibility; of emotional, spiritual and intellectual to be regained. Eliot develops the theme drawing upon related patterns in nature, myth and religion: the cycle of the seasons, the ancient fertility myths of Egypt, India and Greece , in which the God must die to be reborn, to bring fertility to the soil and potency to the people; a pattern known as the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Eliot seems to have had this method in mind when he commented that "*The concentration resulting from a frame work of mythology and theology and philosophy is one of the reasons why, Dante is a classic, and Blake only a poet of genius*".

The Waste Land is a poem in which many things meet, a *mélange adulte de tout*. It condenses and connects past and present, showing the decline of history but also its unity, exploring the detail of one modern bourgeois city, London, but also of all the cities of the world. The structure of the poem, is not a consistent narrative, but a large emotional curse taking a detour from the collapsing empires of Europe through the vision of the quest towards the possible salvation. If the detail is difficult the underlying myth of a search for fertility and redemption is not hard to see. In welcoming Ulysses, Eliot had spoken of its continuous parallel between antiquity and contemporaneity as '*a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history*'. He added that, thanks to modern psychology and anthropology, it was possible to use a 'mythical method' which would be a step, toward making the modern world possible for art. It is clear that the comments have some appropriateness to Ulysses, but they apply even more fittingly to The Waste Land. After his husband's death his second wife Valerie declared that '*He felt he had paid too high a price to be a poet, that he had*



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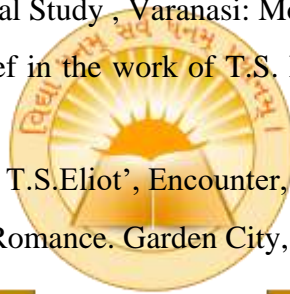
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*suffered too much*'. The Waste Land is a poem of that suffering, but is vastly more. As the critics on both the sides have said, modern poetry could not be the same without it.

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