The disintegration of the triangle of man, myth and nature in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922)

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Abstract

This research is an attempt at revealing T. S. Eliot's emphasis in *The Waste Land* (1922) on the modem man's urgent need to restore the strong bond which once existed, in primitive times, between man and nature, on the one hand, and between man and myth on the other. The strong relationship, or triangle, that bound man, nature and myth together formed one of the fundamental foundation stones of ancient civilizations. It manifested itself most clearly in the vegetation myths and legends and the mystery religions of ancient cultures. What Eliot delineates in The Waste Land is the effect of the disintegration of this triangle. Modem man is dissociated with nature and as a result has no intention of interpreting nature mythologically . At the same time, he juxtaposes the past with the present in order to contrast the presence of this triangle in ancient cultures with its absence in contemporary life.

One may group the different themes one can find in T. S. Eliot's ***The Waste Land*** (1922) under the umbrella theme of "disintegration" which may then be classified as moral, social, economic and political disintegration. A striking case of integration presented by the poet and discussed in this research is that which affects one of the basic aspects that characterized all ancient civilizations that Eliot alludes to in the poem, namely, the triangle, or the strong bond that existed among man, nature and myth. It is the disintegration of this triangle, as the present research aims at showing, that made modem man what Eliot describes him in his poem.

Myths can be defined as the symbolic presentations of man's attempts at interpreting his environment and his inner feelings and ideas. By his symbol-making instinct, man's knowledge and experience of the outer and inner world were projected into direct and sensual embodiment. Modem anthropology sees all religious thoughts and all art springing and developing from this primitive root of symbolic transformation.' In this respect, man, nature and myth were complementary and inseparable. The mythical tales and legends that man wove and preserved in the past depended mainly on his experience of his natural environment. In other words, nature dictated on man's imagination what sort of yams he could spin.

At the same time, the very presence of myth in ancient civilizations and their popularity and the high status they held in the life of early men implied people's close attachment to their natural environment. In all primitive cultures exclusively, myth was regarded as religion and it provided the foundation of ethical, social and political principles which all members of the community were bound to strictly observe.[2]

In the notes he attached to the end of *The waste Land* (1922), T. S. Eliot referred his readers to a number of sources upon which he relied in composing his poem:

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> **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. Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, Miss Weston's book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do; and I recommend it - to anyone who thinks such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble. To another work of anthropology, I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean, The *Golden Bough*. I have used especially the two volumes "Adonis Attis" and "Osiris." Anyone who is acquainted with these works will immediately recognize in the poem certain references to vegetation ceremonies.[3]**

Eliot justifies this heavy reliance on myth as an idiom of expression on the basis of its being a way of giving sense to an otherwise meaningless world of contemporary life. In a review that appeared in The Dial (November 1923), he wrote of James Joyce's *Ulysses*,

> **Myth ... is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history .... Instead of the narrative method we may now use the mythical method.[4]**

A reading of Weston's From Ritual to Romance and Frazer's ***The Golden Bough*** would certainly provide various clues as to the contrasts and parallels which Eliot draws between the past and the present. The Grail legend in Weston's work is essentially about the magic power of human capitulation in restoring the dead and waste earth to fertility. A land which has been blighted by a curse and has been laid waste and arid because its ruler, the Fisher King, has become sexually impotent. The curse is removed when a knight appears, who asks the question about the meaning of the Grail and the Lance - which in Christian terms represent the cup that Christ had his disciples drink from at the Last Supper, and the lance that pierced his side at the crucifixion. In some versions of the legend the mere asking of the question on the part of the knight cures the king and saves he land and its people. In some others the knight must go through some ordeals before this is achieved.[5]

Miss Weston interprets these legends as christianized versions of much older myths and beliefs which go back to immemorial antiquity. She traces their origins to a common source in the vegetation rituals and fertility cults of the ancient world, from which early Christianity absorbed so much of its own doctrine, ritual and symbolism. These early vegetation myths and legends developed later into "mystery religions" which linked the ideas of death and destruction in the natural world with that of a parallel process in the realm of the spirit. The rites of initiation in these mystery religions were analogous to those practiced by people at the age of puberty, and they symbolize not only a biological and social coming of age, but also a spiritual metamorphosis. Here water played a very important part in the initiation ceremonies. The main male deities discussed by Weston in her work as symbolic representations of the primitive imagination are the Babylonian god Tammuz, the Phoenician- Greek god Adonis, the Phrygian Attis, and the Egyptian Osiris. In all these cases, the god stood for the power that dominated nature

and the cycle of the seasons. The death of the deity was associated with the death of physical nature, represented by the coming of winter and the ceasing of vegetation. This death was followed by the god's resurrection, which in the physical world was reflected in the rebirth of nature and the coming of spring . The worship of the god on these occasions was accompanied by ritual observances. On the death of the god, ceremonies of mourming were held, whereas rites of rejoicing were performed on the god's resurrection in spring.[6]

The cults of the god Tammuz designated the cycles of birth, death and rebirth in nature and vegetation.[7] A Babylonian poem entitled "Inanna's Descent to the Nether World," recognized today as the earliest literary composition in the literature of the world,[8] describes how it is divinely decreed that Tammuz and his sister take turns spending six months each in the underworld to fill in for Ishtar.[9] The following lines from the poem describe the resulting waste land due to this misfortune:

Wide nature felt her woe and ceased to spring,
And buds withered and their vigor lost, and flung
No more their fragrance to the lifeless air;
The fruit-trees died, or barren ceased to bear;
The male plants kiss their female plants no more;
And pollen on the winds no longer soar
To carry their caresses to the seed
Of waiting hearts that unavailing bleed,
Until they fold their petals in despair,
And dying, drop to earth, and wither there.[10]

To the Babylonians, Tammuz was worshipped as the god of vegetation and fertility and enjoyed a wide circle of worshippers.[11] The Sumerian King Lists ascribe his reign to the Uruk Period (3800-3200 BC).[12] His death and rebirth symbolically represent the death-rebirth cycle in nature.[13] During his annual festival plants and flowers were planted which symbolized his untimely death and the fleeting nature of life. [14]

Several anthropologists and archeologists are of the opinion that Tammuz is "the prototype of the Greek Adonis."[15] The rituals involved in the festival of Adonis in Greece were quite similar to those of Tammuz performed in Babylon. Athenian women celebrated the festivals of Adonis by singing dirges over his death. However, in spring they welcomed his return to earth with joyful celebrations.

Eliot gives the idea of rejuvenation and its impact on human life as portrayed in the myth an ironic twist in "The Burial of the Dead." He turns April, a time of festival and celebrations on the occasion of the god's resurrection and the corresponding revival in the natural world, to

the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.[16]

A contrast is drawn in these lines. The rejuvenating state of nature expressed in the images of roots coming back to life at the spring rain and in nature's

attempt at reviving human passion and memory is contrasted to man's passive attitude towards this gaity. Far from responding positively to this call of nature, he refuses to take an acitve and positive part. Rather, he expresses his wish to return to winter and be drowned in its forgetfulness. The strong bond that once tied man to nature seems to have been severed, and so does the bond between man and myth. In a comment on these lines, Nancy K. Gish observes that

> **Reading them , we encounter a personal, meditative voice commenting on the most fundamental sign of life and hope - the rebirth of vegetation in spring. We are familiar with these images from a long tradition of poems celebrating spring and renewal .... Yet this description of spring is strange and puzzling, a resistance of life and denial of hope and rebirth. The narrator's emotional response to the physical world is unease and withdrawal. It is almost a kind of mourning, not of death but of life.[17]**

Though still in touch with nature, man cannot respond to it and find solace in its lap:

> **What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow**
> **Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,**
> **You cannot say, or guess, for you know only**
> **A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,**
> **And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,**
> **And the dry stone no sound of water. (19-24**

The Hyacinth verse passage expresses man's attempts at reconstructing the man-myth-nature triangle rekindles the past only temporarily, for soon he realizes that it is only a mirage, a dream incapable of being realized in the modem age:

> "**You gave me hyacinths first a year ago**
> **They called me the hyacinth girl."**
> **- Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden -**
> **Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not**
> **Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither**
> **Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,**
> **Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (35-41)**

The sentence "I knew nothing" reverberates "you know only / A heap of broken images" eighteen lines earlier. The lovers' choice of the Hyacinth garden as their rendezvous expresses their wish to restore man's close attachment to nature. This passage in the poem has been described as one of the most important passages in the poem, because of the hopeful prospects it implies as opposed to "the nightmare of ***The Waste Land."***[18] According to Nancy Gish,

> **What distinguishes this scene and gives it its aura of profound significance is that it is the only moment of deep intimacy and communication in the poem.** [19]

The appellation "Hyacinth girl" shows man's mythopoeic mind at work and indicates that a myth is in the early stage of its making, as the girl is identified with flowers. The reader cannot help associating this identification with the identification of the goddesses of ancient mythologies with flowers. But the prospects of such restoration of the

triangle soon fade as both lovers face an impasse in death and dust: " [x] d' und leer das Meer" (42).

On other occasions, man's attempt at restoring the bond between man and nature or man and myth may take a quite literal turn as it does in the case of Stetson's planting of a corpse in his garden. The speaker recognizes his among a crowd and calls,

"Stetson !
You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
Or with his nails he'll dig it up again! (69-75)

This incident of the burial of the dead, from which the first movement of the poem derives its title is an allusion to the Egyptian myth of Osiris as the corn god. According to James Frazer, the Egyptian priests used to bury effigies of the god Osiris at an early stage of the sowing festival. When these effigies were taken up again, the corn would be found to have sprouted from the body of the god and this would be hailed as the cause of the growth of the crops. The corn god was thus thought to have sacrificed his own body to feed the people. He died so that they may live.

Stetson's credulous attempt at planting a corpse symbolizes modern man's need to reclaim ancient myth. The dog that might dig up the corpse underscores this need. The allusion is to John Webster's ***White Devil*** (1612). The line "Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men" in Eliot's poem is reminiscent of a line from a dirge sung over a corpse in the play: "But keep the wolf far thence, that's foe to men / For with his nails he'll dig them up again" (V. iv. 108-9). Eliot's change of his sources reveals to what extent man's estrangement from nature has gone. Even a dog, formerly man's faithful companion, is now of no help to him.

In the second movement of The Waste Land, "A Game of Chess," Eliot evokes the classical myth of Philomel, who was the daughter of Pandion, King of Athens, and sister of Procne; she was the victim of an outrage, committed by her brother-in-law, Tereus, King of Thrace, who cut out her tongue to prevent her exposing him, and kept her in close confinement: here she finds means of communicating with her sister, when the two to avenge the wrong, made away with Ilys, Tereus's son, and served him up to his father at a banquet. The fury of Tereus on the discovery knew no bounds, but they escaped his vengeance, Philomel by being changed into a nightingale and Procne into a swallow. The story of Philomel is introduced with a purpose because the theme of "A Game of Chess" is the degradation of human civilization through the violation of chastity and the predominance oflust.[20]

Eliot presents two modern aristocratic women, in this movement, symbols of spiritual degradation and sexual impotence. The first is a neurotic woman whose husband, or lover, seems to have lost all interest in her. Although her state resembles that of Philomel in their pain and suffering, Eliot remarks that at least in the world of myth there was some consolation offered by nature. After describing the modem lady's luxurious bedroom, the speaker recalls the myth of Philomel:

As though the window gave upon the sylvan scene
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
'Jug Jug' to dirty ears. (98-103)

Again the bond between man, nature and myth is severed in the modem waste land.

In "The Fire Sermon", the speaker makes an announcement that the "nymphs are departed" (3) and that they left no addresses, an indication to the impossibility of a contact or a restoration of the world of mythology in the modem age. Long does this section of the poem dwell upon the sexual encounter of between a male, introduced as a "small house agent's clerk" (232), and a typist. Their relationship, as Tiresias witnesses it, is void of emotions and the sexual act itselfa mechanical matter, the object correlative associated with it being the woman's placing of the record on the gramophone. Gish interprets it as "not a profound act of moral significance but an animal coupling devoid of intimacy or moral significance in past or fUtre."[21] As her lover departs through the unlit stairs,

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
"Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over."
.....
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smoothes her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone. (249-256)

R. L. Varshney comments,

There may also be a reference to what James Frazer describes as the sanctified harlotry of ancient rituals, by which, in order to promote fertility, a girl consorted with a stranger before marriage, the act being accompanied by ritual feast and music.. It is a sort of ghastly parody of the fertility ritua1.[22]

Fertility rites were embodiments of the bond that brings man, nature and myth together. The role of man is seen in the sexual act itself, that of nature in the subsequent fertility considered to be a result of it, and myth is seen in the belief that sex could affect the growth of vegetation. In the typist-clerk episode, however, there are only images of sterility.

The next section, "Death by Water", is a variation on the same theme. The drowning of the Phoenician sailor is again a symbol of the initiation in mystery religion, going back to the consigning of the effigy of the god to the sea and welcoming it as it is reborn at the end of its journey after it is carried by a predictable current.

The final call of nature to man, "What the Thunder Said", also falls on deaf ears. In a letter to the philosopher Bertrand Russell land which is dated October 15, 1923), Eliot wrote that this part of the poem "in my opinion is not only the best part, but the only part that justifies the whole at a11."[23] In this final section of *The Waste Land* the speaker is depicted as proceeding on his path though a drought, more parching and agonizing than anything experienced before in the poem. Flung

back and forth between hope and despair, haunted by arid landscapes of horror, lit only by a flash of lightning. There is no water, not even a comforting silence, Horrifying figures sneer and snarl at him. As he struggles up the sandy road, the dry rock stands with its mouth of teeth, giving a nightmarish sense of being imprisoned in its dark and deep cave. Then comes thunder but no rain. The thunder accuses man of selfishness when t says:

***Datta* [give] : what have we given?**
My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed. (400-4)

Human selfishness thus has turned the world into a waste land beyond remedy. On the second sounding of the thunder, which means "be compassionate" or "be sympathetic", the selfish are given advice.24 The only key to escape the shackles of pride and selfishness is to feel compassion and to sympathize with other fellow human beings. However, the allusion to Coriolanus (416) indicates that man, despite the warming of the thunder, remains cloistered in his self, just like Coriolanus, who was unwilling to keep faith with a central loyalty outside himself:

***Dayadhvam:* I have heard the key**
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal *rumours*
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus (411-416)

The sense of man's re-identification with nature and myth can only be realized in a world of dreams, a realm of "aethereal rumours", and not in reality. Such a world is expressed in the navigatory images in the lines associated with the final warning of the thunder. It describes a vision of a boat sailing on a calm sea and controlled by a skilled sailor. ***Dayadhvam***, meaning submission, is therefore the ultimate hope for salvation. But here again, the submission is to dreams and fantasies.

***Damyata:* the boat responded**
Gaily to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands. (418-422)

After the message of the thunder, we return to the arid plain with the single figure on the shore fishing. The rain will fall only when its coming has been paid for by sacrifice. But no sacrifice is made within the scope of the poem, so there is no rain. The plain lies arid and waste as the protagonist, identified with the Fisher King, sits upon the shore fishing. This is the ultimate fate of the triangle of man, myth and nature.

NOTES

[1] G. S. Kirk, Myth: lts Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 101.

[2] *lbid*., p.93.

[3] T. S. Eliot, Selected Poems, (London: Penguin Books, 1948), p.66.

[4] Quoted in M. C. Bradbrook, T. S. Eliot.. The Making of the Waste Land (London: Longman, 1972), p.30.

[5] R. L. Varshney, T. S. Eliot 's The Waste Land and Other Poems (Agra: Lakshmi, 1994), p.79. See also James George Frazer, "Preface," The Golden *Bough*, (URL: http://bartelby.com/ 196/1000.html) May 9, 2001.

[6] Ibid. See also Vergilius Fern, ed., Ancient Religions (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1950, pp.5-20.

[7] Werner Keller, *The Bible as History. Archaeology Confirms the Book of Books*. Trans. William Neil (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956), p.263.

[8] Richard Garnett, ed., *Encyclopedia of Famous World Literature*, vol. I (New Delhi: Akashdeep Publishing House, 1992), p. I.

[9] James B. Pritchard, comp. and trans., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp.52-57. See also Christopher Siren, "Sumerian Mythology" (Public Pages, 2000. URL: http://pubpages.unh.edu/-cbsiren/sumer-f June 12, 2001. For more about Geshtinanna, consult N. K. Sandars, Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia (London: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 180.

[10] Justin McCarthy, et al., *Babylonian and Assyrian Literature* (New York: The Colonial Press, 1901), pp.94-95. For more about the effects of her absence from the world, see Fadhil Abd Al-Wahid All, "Adhwa' Jadeeda ala Nuzul Inanna (Ishtar) ila al-Alam al-Sufli" INew Light on the Descent of Inanna or Ishtar to the Nether World], *Bayn Al-Nahrayn*: A Mesopotamia euarterly 1(1973), pp.261-296.

[11] L. Delaporte, *Mesopotamia: The Babylonian and/lssyrian Civilization*, trans. V. Gordon Childe (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1925), p.143.

[12] Leonard W. King, *Legends of Babylon and Egypt*, e-text prepared by John Bickers (Project Gutenberg E-Texts. January, 2000. URL: http://promo.net/pg) May 9, 2001.

[13] Fadhil Abd Al-Wahid Ail, *Ishtar wa Ma 'sat Tammuz* [Ishtar and the Tragedy of Tammuz] (Baghdad: Al-Huryia Press, 1973), p. 172.

[14] John Gray, *Near Eastern Mythology* (London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1969),, p.63.

[15] Delaporte, p.143. For the influence of the rites of Tammuz on other nations, see All, *Ishtar wa Ma 'sat Tammuz*, pp. 167-84.

[16] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1948), p.49, lines 1-7. All subsequent references to the poem are to this edition and are henceforth cited parenthetically by line number.

[17] Nancy K. Gish, *The Waste Land: A Poem of Memory and Desire* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), pp.45-46.

[18] Ronald Bush, T. S. *Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.64.

[19] Gish, p.51.

[20] R. L. Varshney, T. S. *Eliot* 's *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (Agra: Lakshmi, 1994), p.81.

[21] Gish, p.77.

[22] Varshney, p.83.

[23] Quoted in Martin Scofield, T. S. *Eliot:*

The Poems (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.120.

[24] For the meanings of "Datta", "Dayadhvam" and "Damyata" see Scofielf, pp.123-124.

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انحلال العلاقة بين الانسان والاسطورة والطبيعة في قصيدة ارض اليباب (١٩٢٢) الشاعر الانجليزي اليوت

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المستخلص
يهدف هذا البحث الى بيان مدى تأكيد الشاعر الانجليزي اليوت ،في قصيدته ارض اليباب (١٩٢٢) ، على الحاجة الملحة للانسان الحديث لاسترجاع الصلة الحميمة ،التي لطالما ربطت بين الانسان والطبيعة من جهة ، وبين الانسان والاسطورة من جهة اخرى .ان هذه العلاقة الموثقة بين هذه الاركان الثلاثة هي بمثابة حجر الاساس للحضارات العريقة، فهي جلية واضحة في اساطير الخصوبة والطقوس الدينية في الثقافات القديمة . ان الشاعر اليوت هنا يصف تأثير ما آلت اليه هذه العلاقة الثلاثية من تصدع ، اذ ابتعد الانسان المعاصر عن الطبيعة ، وكنتيجة لذلك فقد شغفه بتقديم التفسيرات الخرافية لمتغيراتها وعناصرها . ويصور اليوت في قصيدته الاختلاف بين الماضي والحاضر والذي تنعكس فيه غايته في اثبات وجود هذه العلاقة الثلاثية في الثقافات القديمة وغيابها في الحياة المعاصرة .