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Myth and Archetype: their application in *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

[Myth and archetype are new additions to the various literary devices in use such as metaphor, imagery and symbol. Myth is very distinct. Besides working as a literary device, it also works as a tool to bring order, as Eliot says, “to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history”. It does so by being ubiquitous in time and place, by connecting the past, present and future in a chain and by being universal because of its attachment to the complex psychic predispositions inherited by human beings. It is a part of the unconscious psyche of man which projects itself into the conscious by means of, what Jung calls, “motifs”, “primordial images” or “archetypes”. In his poem *The Waste Land* Eliot has used them profusely in order to bring order in man’s life, order in the theme and content of the poem and also in its style]

Artist’s interest in the literary use of words has taken him to the new territory of myth. Explaining this point David Daiches says:

Thus the exploration of the way in which the literary artist uses words, and the concern to distinguish that way from the more ordinary forms of communication in language, have led in a number of directions and added some new territory to the area of the critic’s inquiry. (168)

He further clarifies his point:

The ambivalent, suggestive, symbolic aspects of poetic language relate, it is often held, to more primitive ways of knowing and communicating than is represented by ordinary prose discourse, and interest in this relation has led modern criticism into an investigation of the nature of myth. Literary criticism here makes contact with anthropology as well as with psychology, though myth to the modern critic is not so much the myth of folklore and religion as a kind of

symbolic situation produced by the proper use of “archetypal” imagery. (168)

Metaphor, imagery and symbol also help in the poetic use of language. But **myth** has proved to be a much more useful tool. Here the poet can achieve more of “ambivalence”, more suggestiveness, more expansion of meaning by saying so many things with so little. It is ubiquitous in time and place. It is concerned with the past cultural traditions or modes of beliefs. It is also connected with the present values. It then reaches toward man’s future hopes and aspirations. With the use of myth, the poet can cover past, present and future so easily. With its use, he can add to the complexity, richness and subtlety of implication. A set of echoing meaning is revealed. That achieves its effectiveness by “striking some very deep chord” (Campbell, 31) in the nature of man. It is not only deep but also immediate. Its contact gives him a mysterious touch coming from its primitive and elemental aspect. And then he gives a dramatic and universal human reaction. It is exciting, impressive and, sometimes, even surprising. It is not his personal, subjective reaction. It is a reaction common to all human beings because it takes him through the immense time and space. It is so because myth is always speculative and philosophical and so, it explores the mind, character, hopes, joys, sorrows and aspirations – all the elemental aspects of human nature – of a people. That way myth brings before us the fundamental reality of man’s life. Emphasizing this point Mark Schorer says:

Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend. (29)

Alan W. Watts explains myth as “demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life”:

Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories – some no doubt fact, and some phantasy – which, for various reasons, human beings regard

as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life. (7)

Myth points to the collectivity of the human race or nation. Their common psychological and spiritual activities are suggested by myth. Philip Wheelwright explains this aspect of myth:

Myth is the expression of a profound sense of togetherness of feeling and of action and of wholeness of living. (11)

Myth makes the earth and vegetation grow with multiple and sensible meanings. They grow with a life of their own because myth infuses with spirit. When artist does that he sees them mythically. Although a myth can not be proved logically or scientifically, we realize that it has significant value for our attitudes toward the world we live in. Dorothy Van Ghent explains this meaning and significance of myth:

Myth is a dramatic vision of life, and we never cease making myths, accepting myths, believing in myths; even in our own positivistic age, we see life dramatically through the myths offered us by Hollywood, by the commercial advertisements, by the detective story, by local politics, by international diplomacy, or by physicists. Myth appears in a novel when the action and the particular set of manners represented in the book are organized in a total symbolic construct of such a kind that it not only reflects the aspirations and ideas, the attitudes and customs, of a large social group, but also seems to give to these attitudes and customs the sanction of some "higher authority", perhaps the authority of ancient tradition, perhaps supernatural authority, perhaps the authority of some vaguely defined power-and-knowledge concept such as "law" or "government" or "science" or even "society" itself. Finally, this total symbolic construct is, in myth, projected dramatically . . . Myth does not offer an intellectual system. What it offers is the dramatization of powers that are assumed to have universal authority over the actions of men. The dominion of allegory

(as a total system) is the intellect; the dominion of myth is the irrational. (52 – 3)

When we move from myth to **archetype** we find certain motifs and images recurring in different mythologies of people widely separated in time and place and having a common meaning, eliciting comparable psychological responses and serving similar cultural functions. Such motifs and images have been called archetypes. They can be described as universal symbols. Philip Wheelwright explains this point: such symbols are

those which carry the same or very similar meanings for a large portion, if not all, of mankind. It is a discoverable fact that certain symbols, such as the sky father and earth mother, light, blood, up-down, the axis of a wheel, and others, recur again and again in cultures so remote from one another in space and time that there is no likelihood of any historical influence and causal connection among them. (111)

Thus, myth and archetype become the manifestation of vitalizing, integrative forces arising from the depths of humankind's collective psyche.

Here one remembers Jung, the great psychologist-philosopher for his theory of racial memory and archetypes. He believed in (1) a primeval, collective unconscious beneath the personal unconscious (2) a human family and (3) in the fact that the collective unconscious is a psychic inheritance of all the members of this family. He explains these facts in the following lines:

If it were possible to personify the unconscious, we might think of it as a collective human being combining the characteristics of both sexes, transcending youth and age, birth and death, and, from having at its command a human experience of one or two million years, practically immortal. If such a being existed, it would be exalted over all temporal change; the present would mean neither more or less to it than any year in the hundredth millennium before Christ; it would be a dreamer of age – old dreams and owing to its immeasurable

experience, an incomparable prognosticator. It would have lived countless times over again the life of the individual, the family, the tribe, and the nation, and it would possess a living sense of the rhythm of growth, flowering, and decay. (349 - 50)

Jung is talking about complex psychic predispositions inherited by human beings. From them myth-forming structural elements become apparent in the unconscious psyche. He calls these elements as “motifs”, “primordial images” or “archetypes”. They are the inherited psychic instincts older than historical man. They are also eternally living. The myth and archetypes are projections of the innate psychic phenomena. They are “unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man’s consciousness by way of projection – that is, mirrored in the events of nature”. (Jung, 6). The artist is a person who (1) possesses primordial vision, (2) has a special sensitivity to archetypal patterns, and (3) has a gift for speaking in primordial images, and (4) can transmit the inner world experiences through myth. It is a primordial experience that can be fathomed and expressed only through mythological imagery.

Their application in *The Waste Land*:

T.S. Eliot’s poem came in 1922 almost simultaneously with the publication of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. It was in his critical appreciation of this novel that Eliot commended the new technique called the mythical method as the only way of imposing order upon the modern chaos:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue, after him. . . It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. (50)

Eliot has always been concerned with order – order in man’s life, order in the theme and content of the poem and also in its style. When the poet is dealing with the contemporary anarchy, he should make the theme itself

look controlled and ordered by (1) giving it a meaning, a significance and (2) ordering the style of the poem so that the poem looks organic. As poetry is to express the complex sensibility of the modern society, where order has broken down and contradictions abound in every sphere of life, it is necessarily to re-mould the language by all possible means conducive to its flexibility and suggestive enrichment. The principle aim is to organize diverse experiences and disparate objects into an artistic whole. To him, the best way to achieve this order is the use of myth and mythical method. This new technique suited the modern temper. It can be modelled upon the musical compositions with recurrent and contrapuntal 'motifs', involving no direct statement or commitment to any definite view, but a free manipulation of various point of view or the processes of thought tending in some direction with a good deal of hesitation, uncertainty and oscillations in moods.

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 some day 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.

This mythical wasteland is the analogue for the modern world of spiritual barrenness. But Eliot has widened its scope by combining with it the classical waste land of King Oedipus and the barren land of the Christian Bible. The classical association is symbolized by Tiresias, the blind prophet

of Thebes, “the old man with wrinkled female breast”, who is introduced as protagonist of the poem. He stands for the human consciousness, connecting the present with the past and his vision, which is the substance of the poem, is a series of flashes, backward and forward, like those in a film.

This poem is a fine illustration 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. Through this method Eliot makes us think not only of the pastness of the past but also of its presence. It means that this spiritual barrenness or death is at once temporal and timeless and the scene is London or any capital in Europe or any place, anywhere, in any period of history.

The keynote of the mythical technique is parallelism and contrast, the likeness and unlikeness of the past and the present. Thus, the modern sterility, like spiritual sterility in all ages, is the result of the denial of God:

He who was living is now dead

And we who were living are now dying

with a little patience.

This death involves the loss of sexual sanctity and absorption in lust, which Buddha and Augustine symbolized as “burning in flame” and which the poet emphasizes in the third movement, *The Fire Sermon*. Again, the human search for life principle is imaged as a journey and in the fifth movement, three parallel journeys are interwoven; the mythical journey to Chapel Perilous which ended in a “gust of moist wind bringing rain”; the biblical journey to Emmaus which brought about the revelation of Christ; and lastly, the aimless wandering of the modern uprooted humanity, “the hooded horde, ringed by flat horizon only”.

Side by side, the point of contrast is also emphasized to show the nature of the modern godless society – “a heap of broken images” – which is living on animal plane purely, clinging to ‘death’ and afraid of the resurgence of life:

April is the cruellest month breeding lilacs out of the dead earth:

Winter kept us warm, covering us in forgetful snow.

Thus, the ritual use of the Tarot pack is now degraded in the hand of a fortune teller of dubious integrity; sexual union is a mere coupling of tired beings and the lady, stooping to folly, gets up again to put up a record on the gramophone and the religious washing is parodied by Mrs. Porter and daughter who “wash their feet in soda water”.

The poem centres round the basic theme of spiritual death and re-birth, so that drought and rain are its basic symbols. The idea of spiritual death is emphasized by certain key images, such as of dryness, sterility and disintegration:

You know only a heap of broken images,

Then, there is the image of sterile heat or burning, which glances at the sun, beating on the rocks; the crowds of London like the lost souls in Dante’s Limbo; the whole world burning in lust and desire in *The Fire Sermon*. The images of life are taken from water, rain, washing, drowning etc.

There is the message of deliverance ,coming at the end, from the voice of Prajapati speaking in thunder – *Give, sympathise, control*. It is a remedy discovered by human wisdom in the past and therefore, valid for the present and future also, because the disease is recurring.

Through the fragments of images, symbols, allusions culled from different languages and cultures, Eliot has been able to put an order on the immense and universal panorama of futility and anarchy spread throughout human life. Myths and archetypal images and symbols have been well adapted to his context and interwoven into the texture of the poem. The aim

is concentration, precision and density of both content and language, together forming an organic whole and putting an order on human consciousness ever in search of the true meaning of life. It means compression and even distortion of thought and language. Great economy is effected. Through the use of these images and symbols, the poet has been able to achieve a complete synthesis of sensations, feelings, emotions and thoughts. All these have been properly associated and blended in the totality of the poet's creative experience. Diversity has totally been transmuted into unity. They have provided him with the "objective correlative" which Eliot likes to have in every poem and drama:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of a particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate the sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (50)

This is exactly what myth and archetype achieve in *The Waste Land*; Eliot has been able to achieve this equivalence (correlative) between "objects, a situation, a chain of events" and "that particular emotion" perfectly well with the use of myth and archetype. They are "communicated" to us by "a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions". The words in the poem give the impression of having been "automatically released" by the events being described. This is the spirit of unity which runs throughout the poem. The stray elements that enter into the poet's experience are harmonized and unified. It has the proper association of sensibility which he so praised in the Metaphysical poets. It has the completeness and effectiveness of the mental and emotional organisation. And that, according to Eliot, makes the difference between an intellectual poet and a reflective poet. An intellectual poet, like Tennyson and Browning, thinks but he does not feel the thought "as immediately as the odour of a rose". For a reflective poet, thought is an experience, as it is for Donne; it modifies his sensibility. Eliot, in this poem, is a reflective poet. As such, he has amalgamated disparate experiences which he has accumulated with the help of myth and

archetype and then presented them, in the poem, as a new whole possessing its own order. It has an organic unity. The emotions, feelings, and experiences of the poet are combined effectively with the objects, events and situations in an adequate structure. This combination or equivalence helps the poet to express some permanent human impulse whose best conveyor has always been myth. Thus, the whole poem and its meaning can best be understood in terms of structures like myth and archetype. As such, the poem does not remain an expression of an individual poet. It has rather been presented as a manifestation of the universal functions – the archetypes – operating in the system of the universe. So, the meaning of the poem is not only based on relations of opposition and equivalence but on knowledge of the larger system of myths and archetypes from which the literary text draws its existence. Naturally, the words used in the poem are disinterested in the sense that they do not directly address the reader. Rather, it is the mythic system woven by the poet throughout the poem that speaks to the reader. The various myths used by the poet work as the unifying principle that links the poem to other forms of poetic experience and that makes the poem what it is. These are the universal constants – myths and archetypes – of unchanging humanity. The poem thus achieves an order not only in its structure but also in its theme which is unchanging humanity.

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