

The Influence of J. Weston's From Ritual to Romance (1920)

From Ritual to Romance (1920) is one of the books named in the notes at the back of T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922):

"Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie Weston's book on the Grail legend ... 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 (apart from the great interest of the book itself) to any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble." T. S. Eliot

Jessie Weston (1850–1928) was a scholar of the legends around King Arthur and the Holy Grail. Her work was influenced by one of Eliot's other named sources, **Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*** (1890); at the beginning of the book she describes Frazer as 'the initial inspiration' which set her 'on the road to the Grail castle'.

A spring-board

In 1937, Eliot sent his brother a selection of his 'most valuable books' and included this one, which he called 'my original copy, which I used in preparing *The Waste Land*. **Weston's summary of chapter II is particularly notable:**

Importance of *The Waste Land* *motif* for criticism.

In 1957, T. S. Eliot told a correspondent that '*I was certainly not concerned with the validity of her thesis, but with the value of the imagery as a spring-board!*'

Particularly, T. S. Eliot used **the image of the Fisher King** – whose impotence condemns the land around him to similar infertility – **as a broader metaphor for the society he saw around him.**

What does Weston argue in the II chapter?

This chapter, from towards the end of the book, is titled '**The Fisher King**'. As J. Weston explains in her summary, this mythical character has been discussed at various points in the book up to this point. Here, Weston sums up:

We have already seen that the personality of the King, the nature of the disability under which he is suffering, and the reflex effect exercised upon his folk and his land, correspond, in a most striking manner, to the intimate relation at one time held to exist between the ruler and his land; a relation mainly dependent upon the identification of the King with the Divine principle of Life and Fertility.

J. Weston stresses that **this character is not confined to Christian literature and Western myth**; '*This relation, as we have seen above, exists to-day among certain African tribes.*' For much of the rest of the chapter she goes on to describe *the appearance of rituals surrounding Fisher King-type figures at various points in African, Jewish, Polish and Irish cultures*. Then, towards the end of the chapter, she asks

Can it be denied that, while from the standpoint of a Christian interpretation the character of the Fisher King is simply incomprehensible, from the standpoint of a Folk-tale inadequately explained, from that of a Ritual survival it assumes a profound meaning and significance.

At the advanced age of 70, Jessie Weston, who had spent decades immersed in the Arthurian canon, wrote *From Ritual to Romance* to attempt to explain the roots of the legend of the Holy Grail. She enumerates the seemingly inexplicable elements of the quest--The Fisher King, The Wasteland, the Chapel Perilous, and the Grail Cup itself--and ties them to the symbols and initiatory rites of the ancient mystery religions. She also attempts to identify the author and locality of the tale. Her thesis still inspires heated controversy among academics. It is also claimed that T.S. Elliot's *The Wasteland* was based on this book, although this has been questioned.

One thing is certain; although this book is one of the bullet-points of 20th century culture, probably very few have read and understood it in its entirety. Written in a formal academic style, with extensive passages in a dozen different languages, *From Ritual to Romance* is frankly a tough, but ultimately very rewarding read.

As part of a foreword to his notes on "The Waste Land," Eliot writes: "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* (Cambridge)." **Eliot proceeds to claim that he is deeply indebted to Weston's book, and that its subject matter informs much of his poem.**

***From Ritual to Romance* is a scholarly work that studies in great detail the various legends of the Holy Grail. In it Weston uses such terms as "Fisher King" and "Waste Land," and also delves into the importance of the Tarot pack — which Eliot uses as a prop in the Madame Sosostriis episode. Most important to Weston's book is the Grail itself: the famed cup from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper, and which was used to collect his blood after the crucifixion. Many stories involving the Grail exist. In one such tale, the man with the lance who pierces Jesus's side on the cross is cured of blindness by the blood in the cup. Endowed with restorative powers by its association with Christ, the Grail becomes one of the great relics, sought after by kings and knights for centuries.**

J. Weston focuses in particular on medieval accounts of the Grail legend, but links these tales to earlier traditions. For example, some of the Mystery cults during the Roman Empire — hidden sects, each dedicated to a single God — practiced baptismal rites by blood, reminiscent of the life-giving powers the blood in the Grail offers. Fertility, restoration, and rebirth are the key themes; they constitute the promise of the Grail, its capability to save an individual and even an entire land from calamity.

In the archetypal version of the story, **a king falls ill or becomes impotent. As a result, his kingdom turns desolate. The ravaged lands, wasting away, need a remedy. So a brave knight heads off on a quest to obtain the Holy Grail, which will bring life and fruitfulness back to the kingdom. The knight must face numerous obstacles, and near the end of his journey passes through the Perilous Chapel, a nightmarish place that represents his biggest challenge yet. When he finally finds the Grail, it restores the king and his kingdom. Rejoicing follows.**

R. Wagner and Verlaine have plucked at this tale, and **Eliot borrows from their versions**. For the most part, however, the poet invokes that original template which Weston seeks in her own work; he even casts himself as **the Fisher King at several points**, and describes **the rains come to cleanse the wasteland at the poem's end**. Of course, how happy an ending Eliot offers is up to debate. There is little in the way of specific reference to the Grail itself in the poem. **Eliot refers to those elements and figures that surround the holy chalice in the various tales — the impotent king, the wasteland, the perilous chapel and cemetery, the rejoicing of the restored kingdom — but rarely to the cup as an object. The Grail does not magically appear in the final stanzas, come to rescue us all; instead, Eliot suggests, it is up to mankind to construct our own salvation.**