

THE WASTE LAND

Eliot's immediate Waste Land is the world, as he saw it, after WWI. The "waste" is not, however, that of war's devastation and bloodshed, but the emotional and spiritual sterility of Western man, the "waste" of our civilization. The central theme of the poem is concerned with the breakdown of civilization, the resulting death-in-life which is the consequence of that breakdown, and the difficulties of cultural regeneration from this death-in-life. Thus the poem is ultimately about the salvation of the Waste Land, not as a certainty, but as a possibility: of emotional, spiritual, intellectual vitality to be regained.

From Jessie Weston's From Ritual to Romance (1920), he made particular use of the account of the Fisher King, a figure which recurs in a number of fertility myths. His land is under a curse and laid waste. The Fisher King is impotent, by illness, maiming (a wound to the groin), or old age; and his people are likewise infertile. The curse can only be lifted by the arrival of a stranger who must put or answer certain ritual questions.

Weston notes that in Medieval times this myth was combined with the legend of the Grail. The Grail was the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper and in which Joseph of Arimathea caught the blood from the wound made in Christ's side at the crucifixion, and brought it to Glastonbury in the West of England. The Grail was therefore regarded as a supremely holy Christian relic. It was lost, and the search for the Grail became a powerful narrative image for man's search for spiritual truth, an image used by many medieval writers. The searcher for the Grail is a questing knight, who can heal the King, the land, and save himself by asking the proper question; his quest takes him to the Chapel Perilous where he must sleep on an altar-bier and be killed and reborn; and then he must journey further to a Castle of the Holy Grail, where the Knight is shown many marvelous things, including a lance and a cup (the Lance which pierced Christ's side), a head on a silver platter, and a grail that offers whatever food the questing Knight desires. When the Knight asks the proper questions, the plight of the land and the people is eased.

Weston traces the cup and the lance to drawings on tarot cards that were used in ancient Egypt to forecast the rising waters of the Nile, and thus the renewal of fertility in the land. She further suggests that the lance is symbolic of the male sexual organ, and the cup of the female organ.

Each of the five sections cleaves closely to the theme. This five-section structure is derived from the influence on Eliot and Pound of Shakespearean five-act dramatic structure.

(Act I) The hero first makes an initial discovery and consequent choice;

(Act II) he explores those choices;

(Act III) he makes a crucial choice, always a fatal one;

(Act IV) he struggles, but loses in his encounter with the opposition; and

(Act V) he makes his final choice, one that is imposed upon him and is thus unavoidable.

Finally, in Shakespearean drama, the end brings an evaluation of the life and choices of the hero.