

A Critical Study of the Myths, Classical References and Allusions in the T. S. Eliots the Waste Land

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Abstract:

The present paper sought to analyze myths, allusions and classical references used by T. S. Eliot in his *magnus opus* poem 'The Waste Land'. A poem contains symbolic representation of myths, classical references and allusions. The study concentrates on the poet's attitude towards the contemporary society. He justifies his uneasiness by giving the passing references from classical literatures. A study pinpoints the cultural and social decadences depicted by the poet by presenting the major classical personas and the symbolic events from the great classics. A poem depicts the spiritual deadness and barrenness on the glorious land of England. To express his views on the spiritual deadness of the land; he gives classical references and allusions to depict the contemporary situation of the land. Every reference stand symbolic. It presents the loss of spiritual aspects of the glorious land. He uses farfetched classical references and biblical allusions to depict the contemporary perturbation. It is critical commentary on the chaotic situation of the contemporary society. The classical references and allusions used here are very apt and convincing. Eliot has brought it poignantly. The present study is confined with only critical study of allusions, references and symbolic perspectives used by Eliot in his poem, 'The Waste Land'.

Keywords: Allusions, Classical, References and Symbolism etc

Introduction:

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is an epoch-making poem in the history of modern English poetry. It contains theme of weariness and disillusion of the contemporary society. It comments on the adverse effects of the First World War. The poem encompasses decay of moral, sexual and spiritual values of the contemporary society. The poem deeply contemplates on the upcoming values of the post-modern society. This poem is dedicated to his close friend Ezra Pound and narrates his feelings about the ruins of contemporary society. This poem is heart to heart talk with contemporary readers and he appeals to recover from the decay of social and cultural values. He presents the universal issue of loss of cultural values. The poem was published in *The Criterion in 1922*. The title of the poem is taken from Jessie Weston's book *Ritual to Romance*.

According to pioneer critic Jay Martin, "Eliot's *The Waste Land* influences all severance between poetry and beliefs. It also focuses on the organization, application of myth and also on structural unity and various opinions" (Martin, Jay, p-6). It discusses the decay of civilization by giving the classical references. The poem deals with dark and gloomy picture of British culture. Compare to his earlier

poems, this poem creates a large perspective regarding the transformation in the cultural and social values in the contemporary society.

The poem is an outcome of disillusionment of the post-war generation. It discusses the dilemma of the modern mind. The poem blends the west and east philosophical and spiritual perspectives to rejuvenate the loss and decay of culture. Many critics have pointed out that *The Waste Land* is a ceaseless brook of literary allusions. The readers drench in the poetic rapture as they came across allusions after allusions and references after references. Each section of the poem contain social document which he has confined in the realm of his poetic touch. Though the poem is lengthy only due to use of classical references, myths and symbolism. The poem has got immense popularity in the modern and postmodern literature still. Eliot has taken the sources from biblical scriptures, Greek mythology and philosophy from the east religion. The readers have to take efforts to understand his use of myths and allusion because he has used various cultural and biblical references which are unfamiliar to the readers. According to F. R. Leavis, “theme of the remoteness of civilization described in *The Waste Land* from the natural rhythms is brought out in paradoxical manner to depict the fertility ritual and decay of civilization” (Kenner, Hugh, p-90).

Research Methodology:

The present study is only confined with critical perspectives of the classical references and allusions used in the T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*. It is considered as social manuscript on decay of civilization.

The Objectives of the Study:

1. To study the sources of the myths, allusions and classical references which are used by the poet?
2. To study the poetic skill in concern with use of cultivation of the myths, allusions and classical references.
3. To point out the symbolic meaning of the myths, allusions and classical references.
4. To focus on the poet's contemplation on decay of civilization.
5. To interpret the symbolic meaning of myths, allusions, and classical references.

Assumptions and Hypothesis:-

The study assumes the following aspects :

1. It seems that poem is endless treasure of myths, allusions and classical references.
2. The poem stands symbolic and is an expression of fertility ritual and disillusionment.
3. It seems that it is an amalgamation of east and west religious philosophy.

Methodology: -

Data is collected from primary and secondary sources. The study has given emphasize on critical texts for the purpose of analysis and interpretation. The study is only confined to the study of poetic devices.

A Theoretical Discussion on the Topic:-

The study is confined with myths, allusions and classical references in the poem *The Waste Land*; so it is necessary to establish the conceptual meaning of these literary devices. These devices can

be interpreted on the contextual as well as conceptual level. Myths can be defined as the narratives which contain culture's belief, history, taboos, and customs by representing the figures of Gods, heroes or supernatural elements. It helps to expound various theoretical discussions. Myths always focus on the creation of the world, cycle of the seasons and on the celestial bodies. A myth implies the cultural values. Myths focus on the moral, social, and ethical values. Myths expound the universal themes and human experiences.

Allusion is a literary device in which we find passing references of another work of literature, historical event or cultural element. It draws the attention of the readers to clear their doubts and enhance the knowledge of them through the process of intertextuality or by passing references. The term is derived from the Latin word *allure*, which means to recollect or to refer.

The term classical reference goes back to the earlier literature of the Greek and Latin. Whenever the modern literature refers to the earlier literature from Greek classics to illustrate their opinions; it becomes the part of classical references. It is just like the touchstone method given by Matthew Arnold which pertains to the expression of quality literary works.

Symbolism is a very significant device which expresses deeper meaning in art and literature. The symbolic movement initiated by Arthur Symonds played a dominant role in the modern English literature. The term implies that one thing, object or action stands for something abstract or beyond its literal meaning.

T.S. Eliot in his special note on *The Waste Land* acknowledges two outstanding works of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. The *Golden Bough* contains primitive life and profound interest in myth and ritual. Frazer goes back to the primordial roots and expounds symbolic meanings of myths. Frazer describes the myths and rites associated with Greek literary figures like *Adonis*, *Attis* and *Osiris*. *The Waste Land* deals with the theme of barrenness which is similarly compared with Jessie Weston's *the waste land* in *From Ritual to Romance*. Eliot's use of abundance of myths and references brings poetic significance to the readers. The major themes of *The Waste Land* are sexual perversion and sterility in the contemporary age. It discusses the decadence of the European Civilization. It gives degradation of human nature.

The poet has drawn sources from Greek and Latin classics, philosophy, French, German and English literature. Even he has taken references from Dante and from Indian philosophy. The poem echoes multiple sources. The poet has derived sources from the French symbolist writers like Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Jules Laforgue. A large part of mystical elements have been derived from Jessie Weston's book *Ritual to Romance* and James Frazer's book *From Ritual to Romance*. The poet has used the same myth of the *Fisher King* who had sexual impotence and a questing knight saves the waste land. It is known as *The Legend of Holy Grail*.

The role of **Tiresias** as a play is very significant. He is considered as the mouthpiece of the poet. He bridges the link between various sections of the poem. Whatever Tiresias witnesses becomes the substance of the poem. He has wide experience and is bi-sexual. He is detached. He merely witnesses the events. He is blind. There are myths about Tiresias that one day he saw snakes coupling and struck with them with his stick and he gets transformed into a woman, later the same thing took place and he turned into a man.

According to T. S. Eliot, "Myth is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which contains contemporary history and make use of narrative method. It is to be used as mythical method" (Bradbrook, M.C.p-30). The myth is

amalgamation of social, cultural values. The myth of the Fisher King referred from Jessie Weston's book contains anthropological theme. It deals with the legend of Holy Grail and depicts the significance of quester scene in the poem. It narrates the efforts of Knight to save the sexual impotency of the land of the king Fisher. The quester hopes to get drops of water on the barren land. The Grail has originally connected with the myth of fertility.

The poem deals with five sections. The first section is known as **The Burial of the Dead**. The protagonist of the poem Tiresias regrets on the spiritual sterility in contemporary age. Tiresias is mouth piece of the poet who is blind and fishing on the bank of the river Thames. The first line of the poem alludes contrasting to the Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer quotes April is the gayest month but for Eliot April is the crullest month. Even the reference goes back to the season of Easter when Christ was crucified. The poet has also taken allusion from **James Thomson's poem To "Our Ladies of Death"** by using diction such as "feeding" and a "little life". In the lines 15-16 the poet uses the words like Marie, Marie, hold on tight refers to the autobiography of Marie Larisch, Countess and relation of king Ludwig. Hyacinths flowers in the first section stand as symbol of resurrection. The character of "**Madame Sosostris**" refers to novel **Crome Yellow** (1921) by Aldous Huxley. She was fortune teller but Eliot's madame Sosostris is fake fortune teller. **The Lady of Rock Refers to The Renaissance by Walter Pater** in which he discusses about Mona Lisa. He also alludes the war of 'Mylae' which was fought between Romans and the Carthaginians.

The second section of the poem is entitled as **The Game of Chess** which deals with the sterility and hopelessness of life. The poet expresses his regret by alluding earlier references from literature. This second section sets at drawing room of **Belladonna in London**. He describes the hopeless luxurious life of London. He takes references from 'The **Lady of the Rock**', '**Dido**', '**Cleopatra**', '**Pope's Belinda**', **Keats' Lamia**, **the Great Whore of the Bible**'.

"Jug still she cried, and still the world pursues
Jug Jug to dirty ears" (The Waste Land. p- 97-103).

The poet refers to **Ovid's Metamorphoses** in which Philomel, the younger sister of Procne, wife of King Tereus, was raped by him and her tongue cut off after barbarous rape. She was tongueless lady managed to weave her sad story in a web, which she sends to Procne. He kills his own son serves it to Tereus. The king discovers it pursues his wife who fled to **Philomela**. Gods changed all three in to birds, Tereus became the hawk, his wife, the swallow and Philomela as the nightingale. Jug, Jug is the sound of nightingale reproduced by Elizabethan poets as jug jug.

Eliot refers to **Milton's Paradise Lost by Sylvana Scene**. It signifies the scene before satan when he first arrives at the borders of Eden. The third section of the poem contains 'The Fire Sermon' The poet takes allusion from Buddha's preaching which is known as Fire Sermon. Lord Buddha preaches that passion is the root cause of suffering and evil. Eliot frames this teaching in the context of passion of sex. Even Eliot takes passing reference of St. Augustine's philosophy. Eliot is influenced by St. Augustine's analysis of human sufferings elucidated in his famous book **Confessions**. The poem is best illustrations of Eastern and Western philosophy. He also takes reference to **Edmund Spenser's Prothalamion**.

Poet in the Quester Scene compares the questers with **Ferdinand**, the prince of Naples in **Shakespeare's The Tempest**. He thinks that his father Alonso, has been drowned. The protagonist Tiresias becomes the brother of the Fisher King. He laments on the impotency of the king and fishes for his redemption from his torment.

“O the moon shines bright on Mrs. Porter
And on the daughter of Mrs. Porter.
And they both wash their feet in Soda-water
And so they doughtier
To keep them clean”. (The Waste Land Stanza, 199-201) .

It signifies the Christian ceremony of foot washing. It mocks the modern lover's banal idea of glamour.

Fourth section of the poem is entitled as ‘Death By Water’ which deals with hope of salvation from the fire of passion. It hopes for purgation of the body and soul. The poet takes allusion from the book ‘**Life and Death of Jason**’ (1867) by **William Morris**. In Book IV the song of Orpheus to the Argonauts discusses about a Phoenician sailor as victim of the sea. The poet frames this allusion for the freedom from fire of passion. He uses passing references with apt and convincing manner.

In this context eminent critic “M. L. Rosenthal in his article, ‘The Waste Land as an Open Structure’ discusses that Eliot has established common experience with larger motifs of the sequence” (Wagner, Linda. p-44-45).

Section fifth of the poem is entitled as '**What the Thunder Said** which deals with quest for salvation and inner peace. He uses the critical principle of three objectives correlative viz; the journey to Emmaus, the approach of the Chapel Perilous, the present decay of Eastern Europe. The poet takes biblical reference for the salvation from the spiritual deadliness. The opening lines of the poem describe the final scenes in the life of Christ from the betrayal and arrest of Christ till the moment of his death. Torch light of the band of Judas signifies the symbol of terror and violence. The poet gives the classical reference water dripping song of the hermit thrush stands quite symbolic. It signifies the hopes and resurrection. The poet expresses the hopes and resurrection by alluding the philosophy from the books of H.C. Warren's Buddhism in Translations and Hermann Hesse's book ‘Blick ins Chaos’. Every reference stands symbolic and give multiple level of interpretation to the readers. The poet has used farfetched allusions, classical, references and myths to elucidate his views on the spiritually dead land. The poem is very epoch making because of its structure and poignant expression on the contemporary social chaos.

Conclusions:

Eliot's use of myth, allusion and classical references gives concrete situation of spiritual deadness of Europe. It discusses about the serious issue of materially haunted world. The poet frames these all issues of contemporary Europe by giving the passing references and allusions. The poem has achieved tremendous popularity because of its treasure of classical myths and allusions. The classical references work as launching pad for the depiction of the issues related to the European society. Some lines work as stepping stone to the poet's thoughts.

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