Symbols In The Waste Land Essay, Research Paper

Symbols in T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”

When the poem was first printed in book form two months after its initial publication in the “Criterion” of October, 1922, the printer needed additional copy to fill a signature; since Eliot had no other poems ready at that time, he submitted the explanatory notes on “The Waste Land” which now fill about five pages in the “Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950″. The notes have been the focus of much critical effort and comment, and Eliot has since remarked that he regrets having appended them.

One valuable function of the notes, nevertheless, has been to indicate some of the works that most importantly influenced the writing of the poem among others (as we mentioned) Frazer’s “The Golden Bough” and Weston’s “From Ritual to Romance,” books relevant to much of the basic symbolism used.

In the vegetative rites discussed in both, the figure of the Year-god was thrown into the waters of the Nile (or some other body of water) and later “fished out” (resurrected), symbolizing the rebirth of the life principle in the spring. This ritual also came to be associated with the religious initiation patterns to which primitive people seem to give much more open recognition than do modern civilized societies. The Grail legends, according to Miss Weston, are derived from those vegetative rites, and it is the Fisher King on whom the health and fertility of the land and people are dependent in these legends. The Fisher King is sick, having been maimed (usually a sexual wound); and, because he is sick, his lands are waste and barren, just as in “Oedipus Rex” (as Tiresias knew) the plague upon

Thebes was due to the crimes of Oedipus against the procreative cycles. Only when the Fisher King is healed through the appearing of a pure fool who asks the proper questions can the land again become fertile.

The relevance of this to the Christian-scheme is discussed by Miss Weston; it is summarized as follows by C. S. Fraser: “The Christian interpretation of this traditional myth is the highest one: the sacrificed king is Christ, as God Incarnate, and the barren land which has to be reclaimed to fertility is the human heart, full of selfishness and lust, choked with the tares of sin.”

The inevitability of the “fish” and “fisher” religious symbolism is seen by reflecting on the high degree to which the early peoples were dependent on rivers and seas, the fecundity and vitality of fishes, and the mysterious “grace” which brings the fish to the fisherman. Thus Buddha, for one example, was represented as sitting on the bank of the ocean of Samsara, casting for the fish of Truth to draw it to the light of salvation;and Christ, for another, offered to make his disciples “fishers of men.”

Another important set of symbols related to the Grail legends and to the vegetative rites is seen in the Tarot cards, which are used in Section I of “The Waste Land” by Madame Sosostris, the fortune-teller, to read the fortune of the speaker. These cards, of uncertain origin, have been used for centuries for fortune-telling in general, and more specifically for predicting the rise and fall of the waters which brought fertility to the land. Of the Madame Sosostris section of” The Waste Land,” F. R. Leavis has said, “… it at once intimates the scope of the poem, the mode of its contemplation of life. It informs us as to the nature of the characters: we know that they are such as could not have relations with one another in any narrative scheme, and could not be brought together on any stage, no matter what liberties were taken with the Unities….”

Eliot has somewhat altered the Tarot deck to fit his own purposes, and the ways in which he has done so are indicative of the synthetic “mythic method” underlying the whole poem. His use of the Tarot pack was very likely influenced by his close friend Charles Williams, whose novel “The Greater Trumps” is built around Tarot symbols. In his introduction to that novel, William Lindsay Gresham writes of “the wise old man, and two dominant symbols water, signifying the unconscious itself, and the mandala-wheel of integration, divided into quadrants by the cross, the mighty sign of four.” Each of these is quite relevant to Eliot’s writings, including “The Waste Land,” as are a number of Mr. Gresham’s comments on the greatertrumps, especially those on the Lovers, Fortitude, the Hanged Man, Death, the Devil, and the Moon.

Many critics have written of the antitheses, the antinomies, and the contrasts in “The Waste Land.” These exist in abundance and are not just accidents of inclusion; they comprise a basic and indispensable aspect of the poem’s technique, progression, and meaning. Many such polarities could be identified in the poem: universal-personal, male-female, conscious-unconscious, hope-fear, and others. But the technique of contradiction goes deeper than this in the poem’s structure. Many of its symbols are involved in what I should like to call “parallelodoxes.” Many of its symbols, that is, simultaneously develop in antithetical directions.

The symbol of water, for instance, is already present ambiguously in line nine of the first section: The shower of rain that comes over the Starnbergersee both heralds the summer and makes the speaker run for shelter. The absence of water and the thirst for it enter in line 24, “the dry stone [gives] no sound of water”; in line 42, “Oed and leer dos Meer” (”Wide and empty the sea”), water is both a negative and a positive symbol: it may carry Isolde and her healing arts to the dying Tristan, but as yet it is waste and barren. The fear of death by water is first made explicit by Madame Sosostris.

Both sides of this ambiguous symbol are inconspicuously present in the game of chess: “The hot water at ten./And if it rains, a closed car at four”; and again the negative side is seen through the allusion to Ophelia, who drowned herself: “Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.”

In Section III, “The Fire Sermon,” the river has both positive and negative connotations, suggesting both purity and pollution, both innocence and immorality. Mrs. Porter’s soda water is contrasted with the ceremonial water of the Grail chapel in Verlaine’s “Parsifal.” This parallel but antithetical development is amplified in great detail throughout the poem. Death by water, which in Section I was to be feared, has become by Section IV ambiguous-suggesting both the dissolution of physical death and the promise of resurrection in the Year-god ceremonies, Christian baptism, the Easter pageant, and the other chief symbolic patterns used.

The symbol of Philomel provides another such “parallelodox”: in its first appearance, again, we see both positive and negative connotations:

Above the antique mantel was displayed

As though a 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.

In context this passage suggests not only the beauty of a remote and picturesque artifact but also the cruel violation suffered by Philomel; her song, the “inviolable voice” (twit twit”) still sounds like “jug lug” to dirty ears. She next appears in Section III, “The Fire Sermon,” after the contradictory references to Mrs. Porter and “ces voix d’enfants, chantant dans la coupole” (”those voices of children, singing in the choir-loft”): Twit twit twit// Jug jug jug lug jug jug/So rudely forc’d / Tereu.” The irony of the reference to Verlaine’s Grail ceremony in this context carries over into the song of the nightingale, at first positive, then negative. The next line, “So rudely forc’d,” refers not only to Philomel but also to the use of Grail imagery in the “Sweeney and Mrs. Porter” context. The closing word of this four-line passage, “Tereu,” suggests Tereus’s act of violation, the fact that it is to be rued, and the sound of the bird’s singing; for “twit twit,” “jug jug,” and “Tereu” were the three common representations of the nightingale’s song in Elizabethan literature, where its moral meanings were emphasized as they are here. Though Philomel does not appear again directly in “The Waste Land,” she is suggested in the other bird songs used and referred to at two levels of indirectness in the “Quando fiam uti chelidon” fragment (”When will I be like the swallow?”) of the closing passage for the reader who is familiar with its context in the anonymous Latin work “Pervigilium Veneris.”

As in the case of the water symbol, which by the end of the poem suggested the whole principle which Jung calls the “anima,” the associations of the Philomel symbol have been expanded by the entire development of the poem: By the end she has come to suggest in all their varieties both violation through lust and purification through transformation. Fire is similarly used and developed as the symbol of both the destroying lust which must be transcended and the purgatorial flames which purify.

Such “parallelodoxes” are inevitable concomitants of the associative method by which the poem develops in the mind of the speaker. Its associational basis is not in ideas or images, but in total states of a complex and individual consciousness that is always aware of multiple implications. This sort of progression is implicit in the poem’s entire structure, but it is easy to miss, since its recognition arises in the reader’s empathic identification-”You! hypocrite lecteur! mon semblable,-mon fr re!” The requirement of this identification necessarily limits the reader- ship of the poem, but it also allows degrees of compression and of subtle complexity probably impossible to achieve by any other structural technique.

The poem is essentially dramatic, and its appreciation depends on what Francis Fergusson calls “the histrionic sensibility.” But both the stage and the cast of the poem exist in the mind of the speaker. It is true that often we need to recognize the personages through whom he speaks, but always we need to recognize as well the tone and emphasis of his voice speaking through them.

33a