

Archetypal Approach to Eliot's "The Waste Land"

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Abstract

In literary criticism archetype denotes a primordial image. It is through primordial images that universal archetypes are experienced and the unconscious is revealed. In "The Waste Land" the central theme of sterility is expressed through the central myth of 'death-rebirth archetype' very minutely. Eliot uses the mythic mode with the archetypal approach in "The Waste Land". This paper tries to capture this mythic sensibility, in its limited way, as expressed in "The Waste Land".

Keywords

death, rebirth, sterility

Archetypal criticism is a branch of literary criticism which investigates and studies repetitive narrative structures, character types, themes, motifs and images that according to Carl Jung are universally shared by people of all cultures. These repetitive patterns are a result of universal forms or structures in the human psyche, which when presented well in literature immediately draw a strong response from the reader as he / she shares the archetypes expressed by the author.

The anthropological origins of archetypal criticism can pre-date its psychoanalytic origins by over thirty years. The Scottish anthropologist, James G. Frazer, made significant contribution to this field when his work *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) was published. He studied the elemental patterns of myth and ritual that recur in diverse cultures and religions. Frazer argues that the death-rebirth myth is present in almost all cultural mythologies and is acted out in terms of growing seasons and vegetation. The death-rebirth myth is symbolized by the death (i.e. final harvest) and rebirth (i.e. spring) of the god of vegetation.

While Frazer's work deals with mythology and archetypes in material terms, the work of Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss born psychoanalyst, is, in contrast, immaterial in its focus. Jung stated that archetypes exist deep in the 'collective unconscious' (Bodkin 20) of the human race. Jungian psychoanalysis distinguishes between the personal and 'collective unconscious' (Bodkin 20). He applied the term 'archetype' to what he called 'primordial images', 'psychic residue' (Abrams 12) of repeated patterns of common human experience from the beginning and finds expression in myths, religion, dreams and literature. 'Primordial images' (Bodkin 1) originate from the initial stages of humanity. It is through primordial images that universal archetypes are experienced, and more importantly, the unconscious is revealed. Jungian analysis envisions the death-rebirth archetype as a symbolic expression of a process taking place not in the world but in the mind. That process is the return of the ego to the unconscious and its reemergence, or rebirth, from the unconscious.

With the publication of Northrop Frye's vastly influential book *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) Frye pointedly contrasted his archetypal or myth criticism with 'rhetorical analysis of the New critics' (Frye 140). His essay "The Archetypes of Literature" is a precursor to the book *Anatomy of Criticism*. His *Anatomy of Criticism* articulated the role of archetypal symbols, myths and generic conventions in creating literary meaning. In the field of literary criticism, in Frye's usage it refers to a recurrent image, character, plot and pattern

that, through its repetitions in many works across the centuries, take on a universal quality. In *Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye expresses :

"Archetype means a typical or recurring image. I mean by an archetype a symbol which connects one poem with another ... And as the archetype is the communicable symbol, archetypal criticism is primarily concerned with literature as a social fact and as a mode of communication" (Frye 99).

Frye drew from many sources like *The Bible*, William Blake, the German writer Oswald Spengler, Sigmund Freud, J.G. Frazer and the classical historian Gilbert Murray. But perhaps the main source for Frye was the psychologist Carl Jung, particularly Jung's account of 'collective unconsciousness'. In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) Frye developed the archetypal approach through four radical 'mythoi' which corresponds to the four seasons in the cycle of the natural world are incorporated in the four major genres, i.e. comedy is equated with spring, romance with summer, tragedy with autumn and satire with winter. Frye believes that literature has the power to mould the impersonal material universe into a verbal universe as literature is intricately connected to universal human anxieties, aspirations and considerations. Frye's interest is in the function and effect of archetypes. For Frye, literary archetypes "play an essential role in refashioning the material universe into an alternative verbal universe that is humanly intelligible and viable, because it is adapted to essential human needs and concerns" (Abrams 13- 14).

Archetypal literary criticism was greatly influenced by Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934.) Owen Barnfield illustrated in his *Poetic Diction: A study in Mining* how poets, by their metaphorical language, restore conceptually a unity. The poetic imagination recreates something that has been lost from perception. This notion was taken up by Maud Bodkin in her book *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934). A devout student of Carl Jung, She sets herself to explore and explain the feelings and association evoked by certain passages of poetry. Like Barnfield, Maud Bodkin is allowing for the growth of meaning in a poem independent of the poet's conscious intention. In the first para of *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* Maud Bodkin says :

"The special emotional significance possessed by certain poems - a significance going beyond any definite meaning conveyed within or beneath his conscious response, of unconscious forces which he terms 'primordial images', or archetypes" (Bodkin 1).

And Bodkin in the concluding para of *Archetypal patterns in Poetry* expresses that :

"It is the environing larger life of the community, past and present, stored within the heritage of literary art, springing to creative activity within the minds of individual readers, ... study of the patterns of that inner imaginative life that poetry makes communicable" (Bodkin 330).

Major primordial images are - 1) Darkness - night vs day, 2) cycle - diurnal vs seasonal, 3) rebirth, 4) search of quest, 5) wanderer - the negative traveller like Cain and 6) the questing hero -. the positive traveller like Ulysses.

Myth and mythic criticism are related with the archetypal criticism. Mythic criticism is the study of mythic structures and themes that are repeatedly employed in literary genres.

The best known myth critic is arguably Northrop Frye. Resurrection is a myth but rebirth pattern. Archetypal is actually primordial pattern. Myth is the story based on this pattern. Frye points to the cyclical nature of myth and archetypes. In this setting, literature represents the natural cycle of birth, growth, maturity, decline, death, resurrection, rebirth and the repetition of the cycle. The mythical phase is the treatment of a symbol as an archetype.

On the other hand, many critics like Block and Douglas, have questioned the soundness of theory and of the practice of the archetypal approach. However in the concluding para of *Archetypal Patterns of Poetry* Maud Bodkin comments that archetypal criticism is the connection between the past and the present of the literary art.

T.S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" (1922) has been studied with various approaches and archetypal approach is one of them. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is one of the most outstanding poems of the twentieth century and the supreme triumph of the poetic art in modern times. In this poem the central theme is sterility. The central image is city-desert-hell and the central myth is that of 'death-rebirth archetype'. Central to "The Waste Land" is the sterility of the broken botched Western civilization 'conceived in terms of the loss of *natural fertility*' (Gupta 46). For the purposes of coherence and comprehensiveness, Eliot conflates the impotent Fisher King's journey towards a restoration of potency with the Knight's quest for the Holy Grail and with a search for spiritual recovery through the death-rebirth archetype. In *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* Maud Bodkin comments on "The Waste Land" :

"The aspect of the poem which I wish to consider here is its character as exemplifying the pattern I have termed Rebirth. Notably the Poem accomplishes – in Jung's phrase – 'a translation of the primordial image into the language of the present', through its gathering into simultaneity of impression images from the remote past with incidents and phrases of the everyday present" (Bodkin 308).

There are five parts in the poem - I) The Burial of the Dead, II) The Game of Chess, III) The Fire Sermon, IV) Death by Water and V) What the Thunder said.

The very title of the first section of the "The Waste Land", "The Burial of the Dead" refers to the burial service of the Christian church. The title is directly derived from "The Book of Common Prayer" where it is found in the full title of "The Order for the Burial of the Dead". It is not only the first section but the entire poem is about the love of death and the death of love. The themes of the first section get their first expression not only in the very opening lines but also even in the epigraph at the beginning of the poem. The epigraph brings the theme of death wish into sharp focus. The Cumaean Sybil longs for death because he was unable to bear a senile life. In the epigraph the Greek words are meant 'I want to die'. In the modern waste land April is no longer a month 'with his shoures soote' (Chaucer 72), but the cruellest month' (Eliot 63) since April is the month of the seasonal renewal of life, which the inhabitants of this waste land, in their state of spiritual morbidity, they loathe. Modern man is in quest of rain. "The waste Land" poetises not merely spiritual degeneration but the optimistic longing for its regeneration through rainfall. In contrary, the modern world is actually fragmented reality. The 'dead tree' refers to the lack of fertility and the 'dry stone' means the cry for water. The quester expresses this theme in these lines :

"A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water " (Eliot 63).

The phrase 'shadow at evening' suggests the end of life and the word 'dust' in 'a handful of dust' is a reminder of mortality. In the last part of this section 'the Hanged Man' refers to Jesus Christ and it is one of the central myth of the death-rebirth- archetype. Eliot's point is the humanity that can not stop war as it is a mythical phenomena. On the other hand, one

quester asks another about 'to sprout' which means germinate. Actually this refers to the image of Jesus Christ's burial and the following resurrection.

Eliot in this first section reveals the death-rebirth archetype myth, the darkness of modern city life, the seasonal renewal and the resurrection myth very minutely.

The second section "A Game of Chess" is completely different from the first section. This section has two parts, each dealing with the theme of sterility in marital sexual relationship. Romantic love and married love both lead death. Life is like a game of chess i.e. move and counter moves. Married love does not give any satisfaction or salvation. There is no certainly a kind of opposition. The opposition is between the vital mythical past and vapid contemporary world. Central to this design of opposition and parallelism in this part is the myth of Philomel which is narrated by Ovid in his "Metamorphoses".

The title of this section "The Fire Sermon" is related to Lord Buddha's sermon against the fire of passion and desire. Desire is the main source of all sufferings and pains. Human beings must achieve the spiritual salvation through burning their desires. Spiritually dead modern humanity knows only lust i.e. loveless sexuality and no true love. The section is a sermon, but it is sermon by example only.

This section opens with the Thames river which is a symbol of fertility. But in the waste land a river is not symbol of fertility as it has been reduced to a 'dull canal' (Eliot 70) covered with garbage. Among the bones and 'white bodies naked' (Eliot 70) of the dead, the quester hears another kind of rattle, 'the sound of horns and motors' (Eliot 70) heralding the prediction that in the spring the cycle of life will revive as Sweeney visits Mrs. Porter. According to *New Oxford Dictionary of English*, Diana is a Roman mythological figure. She is an early Italian goddess associated with hunting and virginity. Hunting is the primordial image. Sweeney plays the role of a hunter female flesh. The grand myth of disordered passion is juxtaposed with modern banality. Another contrast is shown. Diana was bathing in the water of natural spring whereas Mrs. Porter and her daughter cleansed themselves of their taint in soda water. "The dialectic or inter-animation between past and present produces poetic effect" (L.N.Gupta, 49).

The narration of this episode as Allen Tate has suggested is one of the most trenchant insight into the sordid nature of our civilization. But the line 'Et o ces voix d' enfants, ...'

(Eliot 71) is the contrast. Where there are children there are hope, hope of regeneration. In the end of the section there is a musical symphony occurs the tradition to St. Augustine and Lord Buddha, both prescribing certain asceticism as an escape from the burning flames of raging lust.

This section "Death by Water" recapitulates all the previous associations of water with mortality and the motifs of death by drowning. The poet expresses the contrast that the lack of water caused death and also excessive increase of water caused death. In "The Waste Land" the inability of love signifies the ascendancy of lust. Phlebas the Phoenician drowns and the quester in another guise becomes a buried corpse. He is not resurrected, nor does the corpse sprout.

The section "Death by Water" forms a contrast with "The Fire Sermon". It is mainly a contrast between symbolism of fire and symbolism of water. However, in "Death by Water" emphasis is on death and not on the hope of rebirth into a new life. Phlebas in fact parodies the resurrection of the fertility God as he moves back in time through the stages of his 'age and youth'. Eliot uses the device of 'memento mori' as a somber reminder of human mortality. It hints at the physical death beyond the death-in-life existence of the waste land.

In the "Upanishads" we are told how, when once the land was threatened with famine and drought, the divine of Projapati spoke on thunder to his devotees — gods, demons, men — and pointed out to them the way of salvation. The title is quite appropriate for in this section Eliot shows to his readers the way to spiritual rebirth.

This is from Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Thunder is the messenger of God. It begins with the final journey of Jesus. The opening lines of part-V alluding to Gethsemane and Golgotha and to the failure of the quester's search for love, say, in effect, that death has not been conquered :

"He who was living is now dead

We who were living are now dying " (Eliot 76).

The poem is actually a cry for a drop of rain in the midst of a vast desert. The mouth of mountain is decayed i.e. there is no touch of water. But the sound of 'hermit-thrush' rings

like the sound of rain-fall. Since the rain does not fall, 'bringing' here simply means the wind carrying rain which does not dissolve yet into water.

The scene now shifts to India, the Himalayan region from where the Ganges originates. By telescoping the Indian locale and using the most Sanskrit words of wisdom, Eliot is relating the Christian faith to the most Aryan religion of which we have record. By bringing these different cultures together and showing an affinity among them, Eliot has given universality to his theme. The sound of thunder is apparently onomatopoeic, Da, da, da and it usually accompanies the first monsoon clouds after the dry summer months. The lines allude to an episode in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. When Projapati asked men, demons and the other gods to interpret the syllable 'Da', the men interpret it 'Datta', that is 'to give', the demons as 'Dayadhvam' which means 'be compassionate' and the other gods as 'Damyata' that is 'to control'. The protagonist's comment on the first voice of the thunder Datta, is made in the form of question answer :

'What have we given?' (Eliot 78)

'Giving' here means 'to give one's self to the others in moments of great emotional or spiritual intensity.'

The second voice of the thunder 'Dayadhvam' means 'be compassionate'. It is very difficult to sympathize in the real sense of the term in the contemporary world.

The third voice of thunder 'Damyata' means 'to control' and the comment has a denser texture than the preceding two. The lustful activities happen only because of lack of control. In the original Upanishad 'Dayadhvam' is in third position but Eliot reversed it to emphasize on control.

The concluding lines : 'Why then Ile fil you. Hieronymo's mad againe' (Eliot 431) — have the function of both summarizing the poem and of universalizing the symbol. These lines take up the earlier themes and jazz them up to a climactic pitch followed by the calm assurance of "shantih shantih shantih". 'Shantih' means not only mystical peace but also water. The poem is the search for water. The inhabitants of the waste land still awaited for rain. There is no progression on the apparent level - the poem ends where it began. But the progress is in the spiritual realm. Because Eliot's use of 'shantih' implies that he is optimistic

about the power of rain which would restore the fertility of modern civilization in the immediate future.

So, in "The Waste Land" the central theme of sterility is expressed through the central myth of 'death-rebirth archetype'. The primordial images are hunting, thirst, drought, rain, water and thunder which reveal the central Myth of 'death-rebirth archetype' very minutely. Eliot portrays the view of the fragmentation of social life in the modern world and the moral values were changed. The reason is human greed and materialism. The whole poem is the quest for rain and rain is associated with rebirth. Eliot is the writer who uses the mythic mode with the archetypal approach in "The Waste Land". Myth becomes a bridge between ancient and modern, a link between past and present. To conclude, the title and the technique, the theme and the death-rebirth archetype myth form a rare mélange to provide the whole picture of natural, cultural, religious and spiritual wasteland. Eliot's "The Waste Land" reveals all the qualities of archetypal approach.

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