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The Holy Grail in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot is one of the greatest authors of modern age. His literary works that deal with the aftermath of the war enabled him to get the noble prize in literature since they embody the reality of modern society after the war. This paper contains two sections. The first section consists of an introduction about the Holy Grail, the quest for the Holy Grail through history and literary adaptation of the Holy Grail.

Section two consists of T.S.Eliot's life and work , an introduction to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the sources of the legend story of the Holy Grail, and the Grail quest in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in which shows how Eliot uses this underlying myth as a salvation. The quest for the Holy Grail has been found in the Arthurian stories. These stories belong to the time before the appearance of Christianity in Europe. Eliot invites this legend to give the reader a key to link the story of the Holy Grail with the wasteland in post-world war I.

The conclusion sums up the finding of the study where the essential connection between the significance of the legend and T. S. Eliot's theme of the poem.

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SECTION ONE

Section One

1.1 Introduction

According to medieval legends, the Holy Grail is the cup which is used by Christ at the last supper. Joseph of Arimathea (one of Christ's followers) collected Christ's blood in this cup at the crucifixion. The quests for the Holy Grail had begun in medieval age, in medieval legends, and had been undertaken by King Arthur's knights. At the beginning, The Grail was the dish that was used by Christ at the last supper. It became the chalice of the last supper. Later, the Grail became the forerunner of the chalice of the mass. The story of the Grail began with Joseph of Arimathea. He collected Christ's blood at the Cross in this cup. He asked Pontius Pilate to take Christ's corpse and prepare it for a suitable burial. When Joseph was washing Jesus' body, a blood fled from his wounds. Joseph collected the drops of blood in the cup of last supper. When Jesus' body disappeared, Joseph was an accuser with the stealing of it. Joseph was thrown in the prison (King Arthur in Legend,:¶1; Loomis,:271; Peck,:¶1-3).

During Joseph's days in the prison, he was provided with food and drinking by the Holy Grail. Joseph was astonished by the miraculous power of the Holy Grail. When he was released, he went with his sister and her husband to Britain. He took the cup with him. After Joseph's death, the possession of the Grail transmitted to his descendants. The Grail was kept in King Grail's Castle. He became the custodian of the Holy Grail. The King Grail was wounded, his territory became a waste land and the power of the Grail declined, because he disregarded his sacred duty (the protection of the Grail). From this point, the quests for the Holy Grail had begun.

The origins of the Grail legends had been examined by many scholars. They claimed that the roots of the Grail legends are found in Celtic mythology. The reversed to various magical cauldrons that have the same miraculous power like the Gail. In Irish and Welsh literature, there is a reference to pagan mythology. The Celtic Elysium is a place, where every desire is satisfied. The gods in Celtic mythology became kings in the Christian Grail legends. It has been observed that the Grail legends have reworked the Celtic images and introduced them in a new Christian story. While some resources claimed that the elements of myths and rituals of the Grail came from ancient Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world. Some researchers believed that the origin of the Grail legends is basically Christian due to era, when the priests of European Churches were developing the concept of transubstantiation. It reversed to the purporting of a doctrine that explains how the wine of the Eucharist became the blood of Christ England, Loomis,:272; Peck,1-3).

1.2 The Quest for the Holy Grail

When the whole world knew about the miraculous power and the mysteries of the Grail and when the stories of the Grail legend convinced that the Holy Grail is actually existed, many adventurers, military men, scholars and politicians started their quests to find and possess the Holy Grail. Through Embriaco's role in the first crusade on Muslim cities, he gave himself a green hexagonally shaped bowl (Matthews, 1981:5). It is said to have been made from a large emerald. Many believed that it is the cup of the last supper. It was dubbed the Sacro Catino and kept in Italy. In 1522AD, when the Spanish campaign attacked the Italian city Genoa, they searched for Sacro Catino, but they did not find it. The Italian clerics devised hiding place for Sacro Catino. When the emperor Napoleon Bonaparte obtruded Genoa, he found Sacro Catino and brought it with him to Paris. The French scholars discovered that this bowl is made from green glass and it is not the Holy Grail (*The Holy Grail*,¶2). Some

believed that the Holy Grail was buried on Glastonbury Tor. Others believed that it had been tossed into nearby “Chalice well”. Some versions revealed that the legend of the Holy Grail ended up in France. It is said that after Christ’s death, Mary Magdalene became the keeper of the Holy Grail. She brought it with her to France (Matthews, 1981:7).

In the middle ages, it is said that the Holy Grail had been taken by a religious sect that is known as the Cathars. This sect established fortress for the Grail on the top of a mountain called Montésgur. When the armies of Roman Catholic Church attacked the sect, they did not find the sacred Chalice. The Cathar priests hid it within one of the mountain’s caves. In 1930AD, the Nazi official Hitler was interested in studying Von Eschenbach’s Parzifal. In his studies, he knew about the legend of the Holy Grail, and the Cathars’ teachings. He is influenced by their belief that life in the world is dominated by a struggle between the forces of good and evil. This belief helped Nazis in their campaign to attack the Jews. The Nazis noticed that the possession of the Holy Grail will strengthen their belief and will help them to rule Europe, because they considered themselves the representatives of the force of good. They also considered themselves the rightful heirs of the Holy Grail. Although they sent many campaigns to France to possess the Grail, and bring it to Germany, but their attempts failed. The ornate place that is provided by Nazis for the Holy Grail remind empty (Encyclopedia of Easter, Carnival, and Lent, 1st Ed.5; Loomis,273; Matthews,8).

1.3 Literary Adaptation of the Holy Grail

In medieval ages, the legend of the Holy Grail became the most popular subject. Many writers dealt with the tale of Holy Grail. Some of the writers concentrated on the search for the mysterious vessel. The earliest literary work that dealt with the legend of the Holy Grail was written by a French poet whose

name is Chrétien de Troyes in 1180 AD. In this poem, the poet concerns with Perceval (one of King Arthur's Knights). He is very innocent in one of his wonderings, he sees a fisher man. This fisher man advises the young man to visit the Grail Castle. It is surrounded by a waste land. Perceval visits the castle, and introduces himself to the wounded king. When Perceval dines with the Grail King, he witnesses a strange procession. It includes a page with a white lance. The white lance contains a drop of blood. After the page there are two pages that carry golden candelabras, and there is a maiden who carries a glowing metal Grail that sets with gems. There is another maiden who carries a platter of silver. Perceval was astonished by this strange procession. He failed to ask the question "whom does the Grail serve?". De Troyes did not finish this poem, because he died. Many writers tried to complete the poem in their own ways (Ibid, ¶6).

Another poet who concerns with the legend of the Holy Grail was a German poet and knight named Wolfram Von Eschenbach (1160/80 – 1220). His poem was Parzifal or Perceval. In this poem, he introduces the Grail as the emerald that fell from Lucifer's crown through his battle with God. This emerald has a miraculous power. It restores the youth and bestows the spiritual perfection. Through Perceval visit to the Grail Castle, he sees the Holy Gail, he fails a magical test. When he tries to return to the castle, he did not find it. After many adventures, Perceval successes to return to the castle with company of his half-brother Feirefiz. He successes in asking the king "what ails him?". His question heals the king's wound, and restores the vigour to his land. Robert de Boron is another French poet who wrote along poem that deals with the story of the Grail. The poem is entitled "Joseph d' Arimathea". This poem introduces the Grail as the chalice of the last supper. It tells how Joseph of Arimathea took the possession of the Grail. In this poem, de Boron explains that after Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea travelled to Britain as a missionary. Joseph settled at Glastonbury. His descendants established themselves as the keepers of the Grail.

The quest for the Holy Grail began with adventures of King Arthur's knights (Ibid, ¶7).

There is a literary work entitled "Queste de saint Graal" (the quest for the Holy Grail). The writer of this is unknown. In this work, the author makes a link between King Arthur and his knights and the story of the Holy Grail. The author refers to sir Galahad. He is one of King Arthur's knights. He is virtuous enough to reach to the Holy Grail. Galahad is the son of sir Lancelot. Sir Lancelot fell in love King Arthur's wife Guinevere. The result of their love was sir Galahad. In this tale, the author makes a comparison between the spiritual aims of people who are enthralled by earthly love, and the spiritual achievements of those people, who committed the love of God (Ibid, ¶8).

An English writer named Thomas Malory (1415 – 1471) dealt with the legend of the Holy Grail. His work is called *Le Morte D'Arthur* (the death of Arthur). In his work, he shows that only the persons who have virtues, and who have a mystical direct relationship with God can reach to the Holy Grail. This refers to the legend of the Grail in terms of the religion and the spiritual pureness. Although all King Arthur's knights are set out to find the Holy Grail, the defects in their characters made them be a way from the quest. Only the virtuous sir Galahad, the ordinary man sir Bores and the innocent sir Perceval could find the Grail. They represent good qualities like purity, humanity and openness. These good qualities make the person closer to God. Sir Galahad is the only one, who could look to the Grail and know its secrets, because he has purity. This shows the importance of purity as a good quality. The result of their quest was Galahad became the king of Sarras. He died a year later. Perceval return to the Grail castle. He found that the waste land has been restored to life. He became the king of the realm. Sir Bores took his way back to Camelot to tell the tale of their quest (Ibid, ¶9).

Many writers and artists were inspired over centuries by the legend of the Grail. The English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809 – 1892), in his work *Idylls of the king* (1859–1885), he provides us with a new telling of the Grail story. One of Tennyson's important themes is the theme of spirituality vs. materialism. The importance of the Holy Grail to "Idylls of the king" is to present an understanding for Tennyson's theme of spirituality. The Holy Grail displays Tennyson's milieu. Tennyson's religious and scientific milieu is complex. It shows a conflict between spirituality and materialism. In 1893, Harold Littledale believed the nun's vision. The nun claimed that she saw the Grail as "an ethereally pure nun". The nun believed that she would be blessed with her vision, therefore she prayed and fasted. At the end, the nun's prayers were answered. Her prayers appeared as a red rose with beatings in it. This elucidates the living of the holy blood in the chalice of Eucharistic. The nun told Percival about what she had seen. In 1967, Clyde de L. Ryals assumed a reader's identification with the teller of the legend Percival. Ryals accepted his version of the Grail story. Tennyson rejected the religious beliefs of the knights of Camelot. Tennyson's rejection of conventional Christian dogma is known by Jean Rosenbaum. She accepts the story of the legend as Percival had told it with alleged miracle (Bor's vision) (Winters, 1-7; Bennett, 22).

A group of Pre-Raphaelite artists (a group of 19th century English artists) offer scenes from the Grail story in their work. Dante Gabriel Rossetti is a poet and painter. He portrays how the three knights (sir Galahad, sir Bores and Perceval) were fed by Sanc Grael, and how Perceval sister died in the way. Another artist whose name is Edward Borne- Jones made a tapestry. This tapestry depicts the attainment of the Grail. Richard Wagner is a famous German composer. He based his opera Parsifal on Eschenbach's poem. Tomas Stearn Eliot is a poet who born in America and lived in England. He wove the elements of the Grail story in his epic "The waste land" (Encyclopedia of Easter, Carnival, and Lent, 1st Ed.10).

Dan Brown (1964 -), in his best seller *The Da Vinci Code* 2003, renewed an interest in the old traditions of the Templars, The Holy Grail and Rosslyn Chancel. David Conley is an American academic, who is the descendent of Hugues de Payens. He is the founder of the knights of Templar. Conley claimed that the electronic equipment is used for the examination of Rosslyn Chancel to find whether the holy relics are found there or not. On May 7th , 2005, Conley told Liam Rudden of the Edinburgh Evening News, that he believes that the sacred objects are hidden in an underground tunnel system beneath the Chancel. The design of the Chancel is similar to the design of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem (Ibid,:¶11).

SECTION TWO

Section Two

2.1 T.S. Eliot: Life and Work

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St-Louis, Missouri on September 26th, 1888. During the first eighteen years, he lived in St-Louis. In 1910, he joined to Harvard University; he added many poems to Harvard. After taking the Master Degree, he left the United States. A year later, he returned to Harvard to acquire the Doctorate in Philosophy. He finally settled in England in 1914. In England, he worked as a teacher, and then he worked in a bank. In London, Eliot fell under the influence of Ezra Pound. Ezra Pound discovered Eliot's poetic abilities and helped in publishing Eliot's works in a number of magazines. The publication of his first book "Prufrock and other observations" made Eliot being the leading poet of avant-garde. In 1922, Eliot published his most famous epic *The Waste Land* (T. S. Eliot,3).

After the publication of *The Waste Land*, Eliot started to go towards the mythic proportion. After this period, Eliot became the most dominant poet in English poetry and criticism. Eliot gave his attraction to metaphysical poets of 17th century and the French symbolist poets. Eliot's works adopted the disillusionment of postWorld War I generation with the conventions of Victorian Age. As a critic, Eliot had a great influence on contemporary literature. After his conversion to Orthodox Christianity, his views were based on the religious conservatism. After the publication of house of "Faber & Faber", he became a British man. In 1948, he had been awarded The Noble Prise in literature. He died in London, on the forth of January 1965. Eliot's most dominant theories are; objective correlative theory and the theory of personality. Eliot's works in poetry include; *Prufrock and other observations* in 1917, *Poems* in 1919, The most famous epic *The Waste Land* in 1922", *Poems* from 1909 to 1925, *Ash Wednesday* in 1930, *East cooker* in 1940, *The Dry Salvages*

in 1941, *Burnt Norton* in 1941, *Four Quartets* in 1943, *The complete poems and plays* in 1952 and *Collected poems* in 1962 (Ibid, ¶5).

Eliot's works in prose include; *The sacred wood* in 1920, *Andrew Marvell* in 1922, *For Lancelot Andrews* in 1928, *Dante* in 1929, *Tradition and experimentation in present-Day literature* in 1929, *Thought after Lambeth* in 1931, *John Dryden* in 1932, *After strange Gods* in 1933, *The use of poetry and the use of criticism* in 1933, *Elizabethan essays* in 1934, *Essays Ancient and modern* in 1936, *The idea of a Christian society* in 1940, *The classics and the man of letters* in 1942, *Notes towards the definition of culture* in 1949, *Poetry and drama* in 1951, *The tree voices of poetry* in 1954, and *Religious drama: medieval and modern* in 1954 (Ibid, ¶6).

Eliot's works in Drama include; *Sweeny Agonistes* in 1932, *The rock* in 1934, *Murder in Cathedral* in 1935, *The family reunion* in 1939, *The cocktail party* in 1950, *The confidential clerk* in 1953, and *The elder states man* in 1958 (Ibid).

The *objective correlative* theory is the way by which the author or the artist can express his thoughts and feelings. It means that the poet or the artist can use a set of objects or a series of events to be the formula of expressing a particular emotions and thoughts. This literary theory is mentioned by T. S. Eliot in his essay *Hamlet and his problems* (Nasi,;517-519). In this essay, Eliot claims that Shakespeare failed to get the attraction of the audience and make them feel as the prince Hamlet feels through the actions and the characters. Eliot states that Shakespeare shows Hamlet's emotional state only through the dialogue of the play. Eliot published this theory in the "sacred wood" in 1920. The painter Washington Allston used the term (objective correlative), when he suggested the relationship between the mind and the external world. George Santayana developed the idea of objective correlative in his interpretation of

Poetry and religion in 1900. Santayana mentioned that the correlative objects can express and evoke the poet's feelings.

Many critics claimed that Eliot's objective correlative theory was influenced by the poetics of Ezra Pound. This theory dates to the criticism of Edgar Allan Poe. *The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is an example of the application of objective correlative theory. Prufrock is an example for the modern man who is weak, hesitant and unable to get his desire. Eliot employs many metaphors to convey the state and paralysis of Prufrock (The state of the modern man) (Ibid, 519-21; T. S. Eliot, 10).

2.2 An Introduction to Eliot's *The Wasteland*

The Waste Land is the poem that is considered T.S. Eliot's master piece. This poem with its five sections rouse the English literature after the divesting after effects of World War I. In this poem, Eliot reflects the reality of modern society after the war. The poem's sections deal with the negative consequences of the war like trauma, disillusionment, spiritual draught, and the degeneration of morals and the loss of faith. The poem is in traditional verse forms. Eliot juxtaposes images to describe the moral, spiritual and economic perspectives of modern society. The title of the poem is connotative. It elucidates Eliot's attitude toward the modern society. Through the title, Eliot uses the idea of dry and sterile wasteland. He uses this idea as a metaphor to describe the devastation of Europe after the war. Through the poem, Eliot calls enthusiastically for spiritual and moral replenishment. Eliot employs the technique of fragmentation to reflect various points of view to explain the drastic reality. The poet uses dramatic context to narrate the condition of Europe in terms of the degeneration of spiritual values. The sections of the poem show that the modern Europe suffers from materialism and the lack of faith. It is obsessed with the attempt to

renew sense of order, cultural and the sense of stability (Ibid, ¶8; North, IXV; Swami,9545).

In this poem, Eliot introduces images to counter the cultural defect of present time with the rich cultural heritage of the past time. Eliot employs image from pagan rituals and from religious texts. He makes illusions for the legend of the Holy Grail. These images and illusions stand against the bleak and sterile conditions of modern life. They express the spiritual and cultural death. Eliot elucidates many failed encounters between various men and women. He makes composites of fertile archetypes that are ironically incapable to offer spiritual nourishment for a dying world. Eliot employs characters that indulged in meaningless relationships. These relationships express the commercialisation of sex. Men and women are impotent, shallow and vain. The culture in the modern Europe changed into common clichés. The culture drifted into a dull canal. He introduces the world after the war as a dead tree that has no shelter. The salvation is in the personal responsibility, self-control and the recall of spiritual and moral values. The poem is written with as account to the dilemma of modern western society. The modern society is threatened with the loss of its privileged and patriarchal position of cultural dominance in the first half of 20th century (T. S. Eliot,7; Swami,956).

2.3 The Sources of the Poem

The negative consequences of the World War I resulted in a moral degeneration, spiritual drought and loss of faith. These negative consequences gave Eliot the inspiration to write about the painful reality of Europe after the war. Eliot depended in his writing and the legend of the Holy Grail and the story of the wasteland that surrounds the castle of the Fisher King, in which the Holy Grail is kept. The Fisher King is one of Joseph's descendent. He became the custodian of the Holy Grail. He disregarded his sacred duty (the protection of

the Holy Grail). He galloped in searching for romance as a result; the king is wounded in his genitalia. The wound did not kill the king nor it healed or grew less painful. The land that surrounds his castle became a wasteland. The crops did not grow, and the animals did not eat. These accidents were a curse from God because of the king's sin. Eliot uses this story to portray the modern society. He wants to convey the idea that what happens in the modern society is a curse from God because of the spiritual drought, vulgarisation...etc. the influence of the story on Eliot and the miserable condition of modern Europe inspired Eliot to write *The Waste Land*.

Eliot compares the modern society with its dryness and infertility (Ibid).

2.4 The Holy Grail in *The Waste Land*

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot uses a mythic structure to portray a crumbling and decadent society. The use of the structure of the Grail legends in the poem elucidates Eliot's attitudes towards the legends and proves that his interpretation follows religious conventions. To give a spiritual salvation that is needed necessarily for the meaningless life, Eliot uses the Grail in *The Waste Land*. The depiction of the Grail quest in Camelot shows a destructive act of moral irresponsibility. The Grail's traditional values are belied in Eliot's modern wasteland. Through Eliot's interpretation for the quest, he offers the possibilities that can be seen in a secular life. The Grail in *The Waste Land* is employed as a supportive depiction for Eliot's desire towards a religious transcendence beyond the modern wasteland. *The Waste Land* is an allusion to the story of Grail quest (Pratt,307; Kharपुरi,4-7).

The version of the Grail legend that Eliot uses in his poem draws on the legend of the Fisher king. The basic gist of this legend involves about a knight in a quest. The knight comes to a barren land that has been stricken by a curse

from God. The knight goes to the castle where he finds the king of the barren land fishing. The knight finds that the king is wounded. There is a mystical connection between the king's wound and the barrenness of his realm. The Grail is only the salvation that can heal the king's wound and can return the life for his land. The knight must find the Grail to heal the king and his realm. While the knight is dining with the fisher king, he sees a procession of youths. The procession includes a young man who carries a spear and a maiden who carries the Grail. Unfortunately, the knight does not exhibit any curiosity toward the strange procession. He fails to ask any question about what the procession means. Although asking the questions includes the key to find the Grail and to heal the king but the knight fails in the quest (Bettinelli,3-5).

The fisher king is a parody that shows the Christ sacrificed for sake of his duty, whereas the fisher king disregarding his sacred duty. The fishing of the fisher king represents the hope in finding the salvation. The fish is a symbol for the Christ that everyone searches about him to get salvation. Thus, the fishing represents the search about the Christ (the Saver). The knight's failure represents our unwillingness to look for healing. The story of the legend shows Humans situation stuck with sins. The story of the fisher king refers to our situation. We avoid the confrontation with our sinfulness. We avoid the confessional where we can confront our sins that should be washed away. Although the poem's most dramatic passages are placed in urban settings but it contains many images of drought, stones, rocks, dry plants and dust. Urban settings provide an atmosphere for human interaction. The poems urban settings show the human condition in the modern society. *Unreal city* is a name which is given to the modern metropolis. It refers to London and its milieu. *Unreal city* refers to one city particularly and to modern cities generally, the decay of many modern cities without referring to a restricted time or place. The use of unreal city as a symbol is to convey the basic elements of the messages of the poem (Ibid, ¶8; Kharpuri,6-7).

Conclusion

The Holy Grail with its miraculous power is the means by which humans can achieve all their aims and wishes. The quest for the Holy Grail is still continuous because all of people have a desire to get solution for all their problems. This quest springs from their needs to achieve their desires in life and to get accessing to blissfulness. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot shows the negative consequences of the war on society. Eliot presents the Holy Grail as a mean of salvation from the painful sketch of reality of modern Europe. Eliot shades light on the difference between the past and the present time. In the past time people battled and made slaughters to access to the Holy Grail as a salvation for their needs in life and as a way to be near from God. In the present time, people are busy with materialism. Although the salvation is available, no one search about it. No one resorts to the salvation. People do not want to be near from God. Eliot criticises the transferees in intellectuality that embodied in the decline of spiritual values. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot displays the world as parallel to the wasteland. Both of them are fragmented. The reader of the poem must rearrange the fragments in a right way so that he can access to the last fragment in the legend story to find the solution for the problems of modern society. The poem seems as a puzzle and the function of the reader is to solve it. The quest for the grail is the most important reference that Eliot presents it. The quest for the Grail combines the present themes with present references. The quest for the Holy Grail is the key to access to the redemption for the world. For Eliot, the most important subject is the quest for the Grail. There is a little reference to the Grail as an object. Thus, the Grail does not appear in the final stanza but it is suggested for the people as a means to construct their salvation.

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