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**“DOORS INTO UNEXPECTED CHAMBERS”:  
THE USE OF TAROT SYMBOLISM IN T. S. ELIOT’S  
*THE WASTE LAND***

Betsey B. Creekmore states that Eliot’s knowledge of the Tarot was derived from a manual published by Arthur Edward Waite in 1910 as an explanatory adjunct to the Tarot Pack of cards drawn by Pamela Colman Smith. She designed personages and emblems to Waite’s specifications (Creekmore 1). Waite-Smith pack is said to have been conveniently available in England when Eliot arrived there. Eliot’s second source of Tarot symbolism was a book *From Ritual to Romance* by Jessie Weston. Weston mentions that Tarot’s four suits are Cup, Lance, Sword and Dish, which correspond to symbolism of the Grail. The original use of these cards was, according to her, “not to foretell the Future in general, but to predict the time of the rise and fall of waters which brought fertility to the land” (Weston 76). The connection with the Grail and water symbolism constitutes a middle ground for the Tarot pack and the poem itself, which is constructed to a large extent on the story of The Fisher King. King’s land is under course and laid waste. The curse can be only lifted by the arrival of a stranger who must put or answer certain ritual questions (Southam 129). The questions, for both Weston and later Eliot, are questions about the Grail and the stranger is a Knight undertaking the Grail Quest, in search of the holy Christian relic.

In the paper I would like to discuss the use of Tarot images in *The Waste Land* and prove that they are “like doors into unexpected chambers” (Creekmore 1) of poem’s meaning, leading the reader towards numerous associations with different myths. The fortune of the land is told by Madame Sosostriis with the pack of Tarot cards and as Creekmore suggests, the poem is a reflection upon the waste land’s fortune and its chance of regeneration.

Surprisingly, some critics dismiss the importance of the Tarot fragment. The reason for that may lie in T. S. Eliot's notes where he admits that he is not familiar with Tarot's exact details and that he has departed from the actual symbolism of the cards to suit his own convenience. The departure is visible in the text: some of Madame Sosostri's cards, namely drowned Phoenician Sailor and Belladonna, are not Tarot figures. B. C. Southam comments upon that fact:

Eliot's note to line 46-admitting to unfamiliarity with the Tarot's 'exact constitution' ... encourages us to elucidate the meaning of cards from the poem rather than spend time exploring the interpretations in the Tarot guides (Southam 148).

The other reason for which the Tarot prophecy is often considered a side issue in the poem is the irony of the passage connected with the character of Madame Sosostri, who has a "bad cold" and owns a "wicked pack of cards." It seems she is merely a fraudulent fortune-teller "akin to her fictional counterpart in Aldous Huxley's novel *Crome Yellow*" (Brooks 133). Her vulgar use of cards is only a mockery of a once powerful ritual as she "has fallen a long way from a high function of her predecessors" (Brooks 133), women of prophetic powers such as mythical Sybil. Not only does Madame Sosostri misuse some of the cards but she is also unable to see the message clearly: "and this card, / Which is blank, is something he carries on his back, / Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find / The Hanged Man" (Eliot 2004: 43–55). For her there is no information apart from unclear warning "fear death by water." According to Southam degradation of the prophet is followed by the degradation of the Tarot: "the section represents the ancient mysteries of the Tarot reduced to the comic banality of fortune telling" (Southam 147).

However, following opinions of other critics we can also find a different explanation of the Tarot's function in the poem. According to F. R. Leavis, for example, the Tarot pack plays an important part in the poem's organisation (Leavis 103). Before commenting upon Leavis's point of view, it is worth investigating the organisation of the poem itself, which will help in the future discussion.

David Moody observes that at first reading *The Waste Land* is likely to appear a sequence of unrelated fragments. Only after a thorough investigation the reader notices that the fragments actually cohere:

I suspect that the poem begins to work and be whole only when we perceive that it has a structure other than a sequential. Just because the separate passages are not obviously related, they become free to form a variety of connections among themselves. If instead of taking them in their simple sequence, one after another, one holds them simultaneously together before the mind's eye, then they may form an arrangement in space more complex

than any possible in time alone. For an analogy, we might think of the solar system or of compound molecule; or, indeed, of a painting. We should not think of the links in a chain (Moody 80).

If that is true, then a progress in the poem is not the progress of narrative. Instead as we learn from Helen Gardner's *The Art of T. S. Eliot* "It is a deeper and deeper exploration of an original scene or theme, we are moving in a spiral, up and down: the way up is the way down. Throughout we come back continually to the same point at a different level" (Gardner 97). To explore the original scene or theme, the reader has to uncover the layers of meaning created by the poet and discover numerous dimensions present in each single fragment of the text. The Tarot passage illustrates perfectly the multidimensional character of Eliot's work.

The reason for that is first of all the fact that the characters enumerated in the monologue will reappear later in the poem but in different contexts. The Tarot passage introduces also poem's major themes like the double concept of death, as meaningless and redeeming which will become poem's most persistently recurring element (Gardner 29). The multidimensional structure of the passage is represented also by the double character of the fortune-telling. Cleanth Brooks, the author of widely acclaimed essay "*The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth*" declares:

On the surface of the poem the poet reproduces the pattern of the charlatan, Madame Sosostris, and there is the surface irony: the contrast with the original use of Tarot cards and the use made by Madame. But each of the details assumes a new meaning in the general context of the poem. [...] The fortune telling, which is taken ironically by the twentieth-century audience, becomes true as the poem develops- true in a sense Madame Sosostris herself does not think is true (Brooks 129).

It may be the case that Madame Sosostris lost her wisdom and contact with mythical symbolism, she doesn't understand the cards. Yet, as *The Waste Land* progresses, the reader learns that her prophecy of death by water fulfils itself and that many of the most significant episodes in the poem are actually attached to the Tarot pack. The reason for that is, according to Brooks that "the items of her speech have only one reference in terms of the context of her speech: the 'man with three staves', 'the one eyed merchant', the 'crowds of people, walking round in a ring', etc. But transferred to other contexts they become loaded with special meanings" (Brooks 157). We may draw a conclusion that even though the condition of Madame Sosostris is not much different from the condition of other waste land's inhabitants, the power of the ancient symbols represented by the Tarot pack remains unchanged. The various characters are inscribed on the cards, and "she is reading in reality (though she does not know it) the fortune of the protagonist" (Brooks 132).

Now I would like to take a closer look at several Tarot images and illustrate how they develop into more complicated themes. Madame Sosostri mentions seven cards in the passage under discussion (there is also an eighth Tarot image which appears later in the poem, namely The Tower), two of which (Belladonna, drowned Phoenician Sailor) are not Tarot figures:

Here, said she,  
Is your card, the drowned **Phoenician Sailor**,  
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)  
Here is **Belladonna**, the Lady of the Rocks,  
The lady of situations. Here is the **man with three staves**, and here the **Wheel**,  
And here is the **one-eyed merchant**, and this card,  
Which is **blank**, is something he carries on his back,  
Which I'm forbidden to see. I do not find  
The **Hanged Man**. Fear death by water<sup>1</sup> (Eliot 2004: 43–55).

The first card mentioned in the monologue is the drowned Phoenician Sailor. In the course of fortune telling, the first card to be turned is called the Significator, it is chosen by the cartomancer to match the client's character or to direct the path of divination. The later cards are then turned at random, just as they come (Southam 149). The figure on the card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor, is associated with the tradition of ancient fertility myths of Egypt, India and Greece, in which "god must die to be reborn to bring fertility to the soil and potency to people" (Southam 126). Eliot based his allusions to fertility rituals on two sources: *From Ritual to Romance* by Jessie Weston and Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. What we learn from the sources is that the fertility ritual could take a form of drowning the image of the god, which was thrown into the sea each year to symbolize the death of summer (without which there could be no resurrection, the new year in spring). Phoenicia was once a part of the eastern Mediterranean coast, now known as Lebanon and Syria. It was a place of annual fertility ceremonies mentioned above, commemorating the death and resurrection of god Thammuz called "the faithful son of the fresh waters which come from the earth" (Weston 38). According to Brooks, the drowned Phoenician Sailor is a type of the fertility god and represents the fate of the protagonist who is warned of, "potentially redeeming and life giving, death by water" (Brooks 132). Appearance of this card is the hint on the poem's major theme which is "the salvation of the Waste Land, not as certainty but as possibility of vitality to be regained" (Southam 126). The reader becomes aware of the theme only when he connects the individual experience of turning the first card with general and universal framework of the myth.

<sup>1</sup> Emphasis mine.

Fertility rites and drowned Phoenician Sailor lead the reader towards Part V of *The Waste Land* which title – “Death by Water” – is a repetition of Madame Sosostris’ warning. Here the prophecy – drowning of Phlebas the Phoenician fulfils itself. According to *Norton Anthology of English Literature* this section “has been interpreted in two ways: either it signifies death by water without resurrection (water misused) or it symbolises the sacrificial death that precedes rebirth” (Abrams 2157). Phlebas recalls the slain god of fertility cults as he drowns, so his death may have a redeeming potential for the barren waste land. In addition critics associate with this fragment another tradition of a life bringing death by water – the Christian sacrament of baptism: “Know ye not that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptised into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death” (Romans vi, 3–4). Moody believes that:

The drowning reflects the inevitable end of merely material existence, the end which brings calmness and relief: the unwanted life is being dissolved, done with. At the same time this is being experienced from the point of view which passes through that death or transcends it; so that the death ... is not the end but the catharsis – a purging away of untransmuted mortal life (Moody 97).

Madame Sosostris, whose prophecy echoes in this part of the poem, warned the protagonist of the drowning, not realising that death by water may be an initiation, a way into life rather than the final end.

Another Tarot card closely associated with life-in-death theme is The Hanged Man whom Madame Sosostris cannot find. In Tarot lore The Hanged Man has attained the measure of perfection, short of complete freedom. For Eliot he represents Hanged God of Frazer, sacrificed to ensure fertility, so indeed freed from imperfections of the mortal life. The card, as we read in Eliot’s notes, constitutes in addition a representation of the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus in Part V. According to Brooks the fact the he is hooded may account for Madame Sosostris inability to see him. For many critics the hooded figure symbolises Christ who is going to appear in front of his disciples when the journey to Emmaus ends. But the idea of the hooded person may have been taken by Eliot, as we read in his notes, from the account of Antarctic expedition on which the exhausted explorers were haunted by the delusion, that there was one more person with them than could be counted (Southam 188). These two associations do not exclude each other but rather enhance the meaning of the passage. Again, the reader may observe how the personal experience (i.e. of the Antarctic explorers) is linked to the general myth. Eliot shows the way human momentary experience is connected with the universal and everlasting element of human existence, which means that we do not live in the world of broken images but the images filled with signs leading us in

our journey. To learn how to read the signs we need to understand the myth. The net of possible allusions thickens which generates various interpretations and this is exactly the effect the poet intended. The Hanged Man who is the vegetation god becomes Christ and melts into Phlebas the Phoenician and The Fisher King whose name with the Fish-Fisher symbols connects pagan tradition based on the belief that all life comes from water with the Christian one where the fish is a symbol of Christ who brings life through sacrifice.

The Fisher King – one of the most important characters of the poem – is represented in the Tarot passage by the figure of the man with three staves. Eliot admits that he associated that figure with the Fisher King arbitrarily, which indicates that it would be difficult to find a logical connection here (Brooks 132–133). Yet, it is interesting that it is possible to find a reason for that association in a later poem by Eliot. In the “Hollow Men” he writes:

Let me also wear  
Such deliberate disguises  
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves  
In a field  
Behaving as the wind behaves (Eliot 1969: 31–35)

The image described is that of a scarecrow, in Eliot's poetry a figure of the man who possesses no reality and is powerless such as The Fisher King, who is maimed by sickness and thus impotent. It seems then, that the use of the card under discussion is consistent with the general theme of sterility of the waste land.

The next card that proves relevant in the context of the whole poem is The Wheel. Waite explains the card as representing continual cycle of change in which good and evil, luck and ruin, harmony and discord perpetually wax and wane. The card indicates a turn of luck (generally for the better) or at least a change from a current condition. Waite's explanation correlates with the remarks of Southam, who associates The Wheel with several ideas important for understanding the poem:

It is a wheel of fortune, figuring the reversals of fortune in life. In many systems of ancient mythology, the wheel is a symbol of eternity, either of the divine or, as in Hinduism, the eternal human round of birth, death and re-birth<sup>2</sup> (Southam 150).

The image of The Wheel introduced by the Tarot card reappears later in the poem in different forms: often as whirling or a spiral. For example: Phlebas the Phoenician reaches the nest of the whirlpool as he drowns,

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis mine.

Tiresias observes a young man walking down the spiral stairs. According to Southam, Budziak and other critics, those images illustrate in the poem the cyclic notion of time important for the life-in-death theme. The idea of repetitiveness of the act of regeneration is depicted in the poem by the allusions to four seasons but also to ancient fertility rites ensuring rebirth. It is important to stress at this point that "The Waste Land" is a poem of the crisis of modern civilisation and that for Eliot this crisis was strongly connected with the fact that the modern man lost his ability to acknowledge the sphere of religious sacrum. This loss, associated with the feeling of fragmentation of the world and loss of metaphysical centre, is symbolised, not only in *The Waste Land* but other modernistic poems, by the symbol of the wheel or circle. Budziak explains:

The dominant feature in art are images of vanishing concentric and ever decreasing circles, which arise after a stone has been tossed into water. The image is a visualisation of the concept of time as a passage without reference to the immutable centre of sacrum (Budziak 69).

The notion of time as a cycle is reflected by The Wheel, the notion of time as continuum by the Tarot itself. Due to their magic symbolism and ancient origin, the cards connect the past with the future and on the level of organisation of the poem connect seemingly separate fragments of the text and relate them to the myth.

It is fair to agree with Brooks who says that all central symbols of the poem head up in the Tarot passage and only here they are explicitly bound together, the binding seems slight, we do not know at this stage how to connect the man with three staves with a wheel, but the lines of association emerge as the poem develops and this accounts for many allusions in the poem and its multidimensional character mentioned before.

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### Tarot w *Ziemi jałowej* T. S. Eliota

Artykuł jest próbą odpowiedzi na pytanie o rolę symboliki kart Tarota dla odczytania *Ziemi jałowej*. Punktem wyjścia do dyskusji jest analiza fragmentu pierwszej części utworu, w którym obrazy z talii kart Tarota, przywołane bardziej lub mniej dosłownie, pojawiają się po raz pierwszy. Symbole Tarota i ich modyfikacje powracają w kolejnych odstępach poematu, tworząc rozbudowane metafory, w oparciu o intertekstualne nawiązania religijne i mitologiczne. Odwołując się do często cytowanych w kontekście twórczości Eliota źródeł, takich jak *From Ritual to Romance* Jessie L. Weston i *The Golden Bough* Frazera, artykuł eksponuje rolę symboliki kart Tarota dla rozwoju najważniejszych wątków wiersza, w tym historii upadku i odrodzenia ziemi jałowej.