

THE POETIC FUNCTION AND MODIFICATION OF ANTIQUE IMAGES IN
“THE WASTE LAND” BY T. S. ELIOT

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Abstract. This article is devoted to the study of the use, as well as the artistic, philosophical, and socio-psychological significance of antique and mythological images in *The Waste Land* by Thomas Stearns Eliot, one of the most prominent representatives of twentieth-century modernist literature. The research analyzes both the classical roles and the modern reinterpretations of figures from Greek and Roman mythology appearing in the poem, such as the Cumaean Sibyl, Tiresias, and Philomela. The article also explores the devaluation of antique images in a modern society undergoing a deep spiritual crisis and explains why this poem remains highly relevant for contemporary readers.

Keywords: Antique images, T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, modernism, mythological method, Tiresias, Sibyl, Philomela, allusion, crisis of civilization

Аннотация: Данная статья посвящена изучению использования, а также художественного, философского и социально-психологического значения античных и мифологических образов в поэме «Бесплодная земля» Томаса Стернза Элиота, одного из крупнейших представителей модернистской литературы XX века. В исследовании анализируются античная роль и современная деконструкция персонажей греческой и римской мифологии, встречающихся в тексте поэмы, таких как Кумская Сивилла, Тиресий и Филомела. Раскрывается обесценивание античных образов в современном обществе, переживающем духовный кризис, и причины, по которым эта поэма остается исключительно важной для современного читателя.

Ключевые слова: Античные образы, Т.С. Элиот, «Бесплодная земля», модернизм, мифологический метод, Тиресий, Сивилла, Филомела, аллюзия, кризис цивилизации.

Introduction. In world literary studies and cultural history, antique images and mythological plots have long served as essential means of expressing the collective unconscious, universal tragedies, and fundamental truths of humanity. Ancient literature, particularly Greek and Roman epic and drama, is not merely a historical artifact but a vast repository of archetypes that embody the unchanging essence of human nature. The importance of antique imagery in literature lies in its ability to elevate local, time-bound problems to a universal, timeless level.

Myths and legends provide structure, moral orientation, and philosophical depth in the face of modern chaos and uncertainty. At the beginning of the twentieth century, especially after the devastating impact of World War I, Western civilization experienced a profound spiritual and psychological crisis. Traditional values collapsed, and humanity lost confidence in its future.

It was in this context that major modernist writers turned to the “mythological method” as an alternative means of representing reality. As T. S. Eliot himself noted, the use of myth is “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) stands as one of the most complex and influential examples of this method.

The aim of this article is to analyze the functions of antique images embedded within the poem, to highlight the differences between their classical origins and modern reinterpretations, and to demonstrate the enduring literary and intellectual value of the work.



Main Part. *The Waste Land* consists of five sections and is characterized by a fragmented, polyphonic structure resembling reflections in broken mirrors. Although the poem lacks a unified narrative, it is held together by fertility myths, the legend of the Holy Grail, and various antique figures from different cultural traditions. Eliot places these ancient characters within the spiritually barren urban landscape of twentieth-century London.

1. The Cumaean Sibyl: In classical mythology, the Cumaean Sibyl is a prophetess granted the gift of foresight and long life by Apollo. She represents divine wisdom and serves as a guide for humanity. However, Eliot opens the poem with an epigraph depicting the Sibyl trapped in a jar, longing for death.

In the modern context, the Sibyl has lost her sacred authority and become a diminished, suffering figure. Her immortality turns into a curse, symbolizing the exhausted state of Western civilization—old, decaying, and spiritually empty. This image reflects the existential despair of the modern world, where physical survival is accompanied by spiritual death.

2. Tiresias: In ancient mythology, Tiresias is a blind prophet endowed with the ability to perceive truth. Having experienced life as both man and woman, he embodies a complete understanding of human existence.

In *The Waste Land*, Tiresias becomes a central unifying figure, yet his role is fundamentally altered. Instead of guiding or intervening, he passively observes the mechanical and emotionless interactions of modern individuals. In the “Fire Sermon” section, he witnesses a loveless sexual encounter, symbolizing the degradation of human relationships.

Tiresias no longer acts; he merely observes. This transformation reflects the helplessness of wisdom in a world devoid of moral values. His vision reveals not enlightenment but the emptiness of modern existence.

3. Philomela: In Greek mythology, Philomela is a victim of violence whose tongue is cut out to silence her. She transforms her suffering into art by weaving her story, and later becomes a nightingale, symbolizing the transformation of pain into beauty.

In Eliot’s poem, however, this transformation loses its power. The nightingale’s song is no longer understood as a profound expression of suffering but is reduced to mere background noise. This reflects a crisis of communication in modern society.

Philomela’s mutilation becomes a metaphor for the loss of meaningful expression in a world overwhelmed by noise and superficiality. Art, once a vehicle of truth, is now ignored or misunderstood.

Contrast and Devaluation of Antique Images. The effectiveness of antique imagery in *The Waste Land* lies in its use of contrast. Readers are aware of the grandeur and emotional intensity of classical myths, yet they encounter their diminished forms in the modern world.

This contrast exposes the spiritual impoverishment of contemporary society. The heroic and meaningful narratives of the past are replaced by fragmented, trivial experiences. Despite technological progress, humanity remains spiritually unfulfilled.

Conclusion. *The Waste Land* represents a turning point in the use of antique imagery in modern literature. Figures such as the Sibyl, Tiresias, and Philomela are no longer symbols of divine power or heroic tragedy; instead, they function as indicators of moral decay and spiritual exhaustion.

By employing mythological archetypes, T. S. Eliot not only portrays the crisis of his own time but also reveals the enduring condition of human spiritual emptiness and the need for renewal.

Nearly a century after its publication, *The Waste Land* remains one of the most significant works in world literature, offering profound insights into the human condition and the ongoing struggle for meaning in a fragmented world.



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