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Julia Helena Wilde

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

J.WILDE@UW.EDU.PL

“Dogwood and Chestnut, Flowering Judas”: The Role of Tree Images in T.S. Eliot’s Poetry

Abstract. The aim of this paper is to examine the role of the tree depictions in T.S. Eliot’s poetry and to demonstrate the way they enrich interpretations of particular poems. In every culture the tree symbolizes similar notions, such as life or rebirth. Yet, different tree species have been believed to possess certain properties and sometimes even personalities – this knowledge is passed on through cultural transmission and thus may linger on the edges of one’s consciousness. This seems also true for T.S. Eliot and the symbolism of the trees appearing in his poetry. Despite the fact that they tend to be presented either as a background or the scenery for the lyrical situation, one should not assume that they were chosen accidentally – especially given the purposefulness and rich symbolism of Eliot’s writings. For this reason, the analysis of tree depictions in Eliot’s selected poems reveals new aspects of interpretations, drawing attention to the connection between the author and the culture he was rooted in.

Key words: T.S. Eliot, poetry, trees, literature, modernism, culture, symbol

1. Introduction

What image constitutes one of the pillars of human imagination? What image is so ancient that it connects various cultures around the world, lying at the core of their beliefs and tradition? Regardless of the changes that our world has been undergoing since the time of the Industrial Revolution, the image of the tree is still powerful and present in human spiritual and intellectual lives. Mircea Eliade (1991) points out that in many mythologies the Cosmic Tree is to be found in the center of the world (understood as the Universe, the combination of the physical world and “other realities,” such as various versions of Hells or Heavens). He also states that generally “the majority

of the sacred and ritual trees that we meet with in the history of religions are only replicas, imperfect copies of this exemplary archetype, the Cosmic Tree” (44). Those copies have been present in human cultures in many forms, often representing the bond between life and death and, what follows, the unity of these contradictory aspects of human existence. However, one may quite easily find the evidence that trees were perceived as symbols also on the less metaphysical level. Their individual qualities and features created associations with even more abstract notions, such as purification or temptation.

Nevertheless, what impact could this pre-historical heritage have on a modernist poet? Thomas Stearns Eliot may be perceived as an author who hardly ever puts a certain image in his poem without a reason and justification. This paper focuses on the tree-symbols in Eliot’s poetry – most of which for centuries have been crucial elements of Anglo-Saxon or generally European culture and tradition for centuries. Therefore, it is more than probable that the poet could have associated them with certain features naturally, as a part of knowledge inherited from his cultural background. As Eliot himself claims in one of his essays titled “Tradition and Individual Talent” ([1920] 2018) while discussing the role of tradition: “[w]hat is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career” (43).

Although the trees in Eliot’s poetry may not seem to play a significant role, appearing more as a background or scenery for the lyrical situation, there might be some indicators suggesting that the presence of the trees in many of Eliot’s poems is more meaningful than it seems. The aim of this essay is to discuss the role of the trees in these poems and to investigate in what way they might be important for the possible interpretations. For the sake of clarity, the analysis concentrates on selected examples of poems where trees are mentioned: “Gerontion,” “Ash Wednesday,” “Portrait of a Lady,” “Journey of the Magi,” and excerpts from *The Waste Land*.

2. “Depraved May,” senses and passions in “Gerontion”

“Gerontion” is one of the poems where the tree-images are particularly prominent. On the surface their presence may appear meaningless or, at least, unintentional. Yet, after a closer examination, a certain tendency may be noticed – the tree images appear in a context that suggests that they should be read as symbols of life and rebirth. It should come as no surprise, considering the fact that in most cultures around the world it is what they stand for – at least at the most superficial level as we shall see in the following sections.

“Gerontion” is a poem of paradoxes and contrasts. Since the lyrical I of the poem is “an old man in a dry month” (l. 1), whose “house is a decayed house” (l. 7), the image of trees contrasts with the aging of the man. This vision of growing old seems to dominate the whole poem in the form of a dramatic monologue which gives the reader

an insight into Gerontion's mind and soul. The words – “[i]n depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas” (l. 21) – not only tell the reader what “dry month” (l. 1) the speaker has in mind, but also refer to the particular tree species. As Hugh Kenner suggests in his *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*, this line comes from Henry Adams' *The Education of Henry Adams* – precisely, from the first paragraph of the chapter XVIII (101):

The Potomac and its tributaries squandered beauty. Rock Creek was as wild as the Rocky Mountains. Here and there a negro log cabin alone disturbed the dogwood and the judas-tree, the azalea and the laurel. The tulip and the chestnut gave no sense of struggle against a stingy nature. The soft, full outlines of the landscape carried no hidden horror of glaciers in its bosom. The brooding heat of the profligate vegetation; the cool charm of the running water; the terrific splendor of the June thunder-gust in the deep and solitary woods, were all sensual, animal, elemental. No European spring had shown him the same intermixture of delicate grace and passionate depravity that marked the Maryland May.

(Adams ch.XVIII)

Undoubtedly, Eliot must have been strongly influenced by this description. To such an extent that he decided to incorporate some elements of it into his own poem, namely those three trees – dogwood, chestnut and “flowering judas,” as well as the concept of “depraved May.” Yet, the mere acceptance of the source of inspiration for this part of “Gerontion” does not seem satisfactory. The question arises – what in this imagery made him associate the description of the “depraved May” and the blossoming trees with the topic of “Gerontion”? Perhaps the answer lies in the deeper, less superficial interpretation of the poem and is connected with the sexual aspect of the lyrical I. As Patrick Query suggests:

“[D]epraved May” has shown him adulterated passions the very knowledge of which is not easily forgiven and even his virtues are the result of “impudent crimes” (21-22). The movement suggested by the earlier poems, from paralyzed sexuality to experimentation with perversity, finds its logical conclusion in the figure of Gerontion, an old man without fertility, community or peace, “a dry brain in a dry season,” the veritable embodiment of a waste land (23). (Query 353)

It seems that the sensual image of nature in full blossom is juxtaposed with an old man who has lost both his passion (l. 58) and his senses (l. 60). He himself appears to be a rotten tree that does not bear fruit due to his impotence – both mental and physical. This interpretation might be additionally justified by the image of the tree standing for life and constantly reviving nature that is deeply-rooted in human mind regardless of the culture (Forstner 1990, 151).

What is also worth mentioning is the appearance of the trees listed by Eliot in “Gerontion.” According to Aas and Riedmiller, all three attract attention with their flowers, blossoming approximately at the same time. Chestnut (98) and dogwood blos-

som's colours vary from white to pink (*Cornus florida*), while a judas-tree blossom is even more “depraved” because of its provoking vibrant pink or violet hue (226). It is important to realize that Henry Adams described the landscape of eastern America and for this reason it is *Cornus florida* that appears in his *The Education of Henry Adams*, instead of European dogwood (*Cornus mas*), whose blossom is typically white or yellow (120). Thus, one may wonder which image Eliot actually had in mind – should the reader depict dogwood blossom from the poem as pink, violet, white or yellow? Alas, this mystery is to remain unsolved. It needs to be stressed that the intensity of the image hidden behind the names of the trees may easily escape the reader's attention, but becomes striking when juxtaposed with the character of Gerontion, who is no longer fertile and sexually active, since he says: “I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch: / How should I use them for your closer contact?” (l. 60-61). This image of an old man, deprived of the five human senses and his sexuality, is contrasted with the exuberant nature in all its vitality and sensuality.

Furthermore, except for the trees that belong to given species and can be easily described in terms of their physical features, there is yet another tree that appears in the poem and differs from those mentioned above: “(...) Virtues / Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes. / These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree” (l. 46-48). The image cannot be explicitly interpreted, since, as Kenner notices, it is not clear whether wrath is a fruit of this tree or rather a burden that it has to endure. He also argues that this image resembles numerous other trees known from the literature: the Cross, Poison Tree from Blake's poem, the fig tree that bear no fruit (Matthew: XXI: 19), but supposedly foremost the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (110).¹ This suggestion seems to be well-founded, for one of the previous lines of the poem says: “[a]fter such knowledge, what forgiveness? (...)” (l. 34), which appears to point at Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden after they tasted the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. For this reason, it seems that wrath may actually be a fruit and not necessarily a burden, since the first parents experienced God's wrath after having eaten a fruit from the tree. The notions of knowledge and lack of forgiveness can be attributed to God, who mercilessly banished the first humans from Eden. Those concepts appear only a few lines before the image of the “wrath-bearing tree” and seem to give the reader more reasons to assume that the tree in “Gerontion” bends under the weight of sinister fruits of wrath, as in Blake's poem where wrath grows and turns into a tree that bears a poisonous, deadly fruit (“A Poison Tree”).

¹ The Christian resonances of the trees in Eliot's poetry are mentioned at various points of the paper. Not only in „Journey of the Magi” or “Ash Wednesday” but also in “Gerontion”. It seems that conversion to Anglo-Catholicism did not necessarily change the specific images Eliot used in his works (at least not in a radical way) - he always referred to the European culture which has been steeped in Christianity. It is not suggested that it did not change the tone or the content of his poems, but that the Christian motifs are present in his poetry throughout his life. Moreover, he converted from Unitarianism which is, after all, a Christian theological movement.

The tears that “are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree” (l. 48) seem to be a vital part of this allegorical scene and quite possibly borrowed from Blake’s poem “A Poison Tree.” However, what seems especially note-worthy, is that the direction of the tears seems to be changed. In Blake’s poem, the lyrical I says: “And I watered it [wrath] in fears / Night and morning with my tears” (l. 5-6), while in “Gerontion” the tears “are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree” (l. 48) like raindrops or melting snow. In the former poem, tears enable the tree to grow and bear the apples, while in the latter, tears are shaken from the branches like ripened fruits. Eliot’s image of the wrath-bearing tree seems thus slightly different from Blake’s, since it not only bears fruit that are wrath, but also cries. This stanza, beginning with words: “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” (l. 34) and ending with “These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree” (l. 48), consists of fifteen lines that suggest, as Kenner puts it, “terrors and vanities of great scope” ([1965] 1966, 110). They uncover human weaknesses, the way history deceives people and “guides us by vanities” (“Gerontion,” l. 37). Virtues and vices seem to intertwine, they become inseparable, since

Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.
These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree. (l. 45-48)

Perhaps the tree has double quality. It bears wrath and, at the same time, cries for human kind as the first people, due to their weaknesses and meanness, reach for the forbidden fruit and in this way they evoke God’s wrath. This seemingly paradoxical conclusion would not be surprising, since the whole poem is considered with “quest for meaning in the midst of contemporary barrenness, the duality of man and his lost power to love and lost hope for spiritual rebirth” (Singh 2001, 157).

3. Trees, memory and purification in “Ash Wednesday”

“Ash Wednesday” is another poem where the images of trees appear and seem to carry more meaning than is visible on the surface. Essentially, there are pictures of juniper-tree, hawthorn, lilac and yew. Like in “Gerontion,” the fact that Eliot provides the reader with specific species instead of settling for a very general image of some tree, implies that they possess certain features which for some reason are important either for the meaning of the poem or for its setting.

In the second section of the poem, “three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree / In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety” (l. 42-43) on the body of the speaker. In his book, *T.S. Eliot: A Twenty-first Century View*, Haldar claims that this image is a reference to the Biblical story of Elijah who was to be killed by queen Jezebel. However, when he goes to the wilderness, sits under a juniper-tree and asks God to take his life, God sends him

food instead. Haldar also reminds the reader that the leopard is God's agent of destruction, the punishment for human transgressions (70). His argument seems to be valid, for the number of leopards may suggest the Holy Trinity and the white color of their coat can be easily associated with innocence and purity, despite the cruelty of the scene. Haldar also notices that leopards devour only some parts of the speaker's body – his legs, heart, liver and brain – which have been in some way connected with human sinfulness, and that, thanks to the Lady, now his bones "shine with brightness" ("Ash Wednesday," l. 53). Haldar perceives it as an act of purification (70), and this interpretation seems well-justified. The juniper-tree is a species commonly found in the Palestinian desert, where quite often it is the only source of shadow. Thus, the presence of the leopards and the juniper-tree makes the whole scenery essentially Biblical. Towards the end of the second section, the juniper-tree appears once more – "under a juniper-tree the bones sang, scattered and shining" (l. 90) – and is combined with a clear reference to Ezekiel 2:1 that has already appeared in the previous lines ("... And God said / Shall these / Bones live?" [l. 46-48]).

It is also worth noticing that the juniper-tree is not only a part of the landscape of the Middle East, but it is also deeply-rooted in the tradition of many European cultures due to its healing properties. According to *Encyklopedia zielarstwa i ziołolecznictwa* (*The Encyclopedia of Herbalism and Herbology*, translation mine), there are many folk beliefs and superstitions connected with the juniper-tree, especially with the smoke of its burning wood. For instance, in medieval times, it was used to fumigate the cattle to protect it from diseases and magic spells. Moreover, the smoke was also used to drive away the "bubonic plague," while the berries were chewed to prevent plague ("Jałowiec populary," 200-201). The same practice was advised by John of Burgundy, the fourteenth century physician of Liège, who suggested that on going to bed one should "shut the windows and burn juniper branches so that the smoke and scent fills the room" (quoted in Horrox 1994, 187).

In addition, as McNeill claims, the Scottish Hogmanay (New Year's) tradition was bonded tightly to the juniper smoke that thoroughly fumigated the household in order to cause sneezing and coughing. Then all the windows and doors would be open to air the buildings and let in the cold wind of the new year (113). This ancient rite, still present in some parts of Scotland, clearly points at the need of purification – both of the household and the human body (sneezing, coughing). Considering all these examples, the unique, purifying properties of the juniper wood are evident.

For this reason, the presence of the juniper-tree in "Ash Wednesday" is unlikely to be just a coincidence. Ash Wednesday is a holy day for Christians and starts the period of Lent – the time of purification before the resurrection of Jesus. Thus, the image of the juniper-tree seems to correspond with the motif of cleansing that is present both in the title of the poem and in its content. At the same time, it matches the setting of the second section, preserving the Biblical landscape of bones, leopards and desert.

Although the third section of "Ash Wednesday" seems to be visually dominated by the motif of stairs, once again images appear of flowering trees (similarly to "Gerontion"), which seem to bear more meaning than is initially visible.

At the first turning of the third stair
Was a slotted window bellied like the fig's fruit
And beyond the hawthorn blossom and pasture scene
Enchanted the maytime with an antique flute.
Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,
Lilac and brown hair; (l. 98-103)

The third stanza (quoted above) appeals to the reader's senses – sight, smell and hearing – and, like in “Gerontion,” the reader is given the information about the season and month – May – when nature is in full blossom. There are at least two tree species that should be considered meaningful for the poem or at least for its third section, namely the hawthorn and the lilac. Both of them seem to be a vital part of British landscape in the month of May, and both of them, according to Vickery (2010), are associated with death, and many people object to bringing them inside their households. Vickery also adds that those fears can be dated back to the pre-Christian times; there are numerous theories attempting to explain which beliefs could influence the British culture to such an extent. Moreover, Vickery (2010) refers to other sources, putting an emphasis on the fact that the hawthorn flowers' smell reminded people of the odor of dead, decaying bodies (50–52). He also suggests that “the flowers of lilacs with their strong scent were used to line coffins, and, presumably, mask the odor of decaying flesh,” and that “white lilacs seem to be more frequently feared than purple” (53).

On the other hand, lilacs seem to appear in Eliot's poetry quite often – they are mentioned for the first time in “Portrait of a Lady” and then in *The Waste Land*. James E. Miller (1977) argues that Eliot seemed to associate lilacs with his friend, Jean Verdenal, who was killed during the First World War on 2 May 1915, and to whom in 1917 Eliot dedicated his first volume of poetry *Prufrock and Other Observations*. As Miller notices, “in 1934, Eliot's memory of the Paris of 1910 was symbolized by the romantic image of Verdenal waving a branch of lilac” (1977, 24). Therefore, the duality of the symbol of lilac becomes strikingly visible, when reaching to the personal experiences of the poet. In “Ash Wednesday,” lilac represents physical temptation, as Miller (1977) claims, but it also seems to point at the memories about the dead.

In addition, in the Middle Ages there was a widespread belief that Christ's thorn crown was made of hawthorn (Freeman 1976, 129). At the same time, this tree was perceived as a symbol of carnal love, fertility and was a crucial part of May Day celebrations – in fact, the hawthorn was also known as “the May” (Eberly 1989, 41). This example shows that symbolism of the hawthorn is multidimensional and ambiguous; thus, it provides the reader with the possibility of various interpretations.

Both the hawthorn and the lilac are associated with death and carnal love at the same time – not only on the basis of traditions and superstitions but also on the grounds of Eliot's personal experience and sentiments. This duality is present throughout the poem, especially in the third section where the reader can see “the devil of the stairs who wears / The deceitful face of hope and of despair” (l. 90-91). The pastoral

landscape seen from the window in the third stanza of the third section evokes sensory response and creates an impression of carefree serenity, but the speaker goes past and the image fades. The trees associated both with love and death seem to symbolize evanescence of earthly life. The lilac and the hawthorn also fit the conception that quite often appears in Eliot's poems like "Journey of the Magi" or "Ash Wednesday" itself – the smooth transition between death and life, or even their unity.

The fourth section of "Ash Wednesday" is considered with the state of being in-between. It also agrees with the problem of the lilac and the hawthorn that, as symbols, are torn between their two meanings. The scene is set in the garden where "[t]he silent sister veiled in white and blue / Between the yews, behind the garden god, / Whose flute is breathless, bent her head and signed but spoke no word" (l. 132-134). The image of the yew-tree appears also in the last but one verse of the part IV where "the wind shake a thousand whispers from the yew" (l. 139). In general, for centuries the yew-tree has been associated with death and planted in the cemeteries. It may be caused by its dark hue or longevity, but apparently there are some other reasons, deeply-rooted in human mind, that could justify the appearance of the yew in "Ash Wednesday."

According to Ralph W. V. Elliott (1957), the yew clearly must have appealed both to the Germanic and Celtic imaginations due to its appearance and poisonous qualities that "suggested associations with death and funerary rites" (252). However, the fact that the yew is an evergreen tree created an association with immortality. He also adds that "belief in the magic potency of the tree dates far back into pre-history and was strong enough to survive well into modern times" (252). For these reasons, the yew seems to be inherently in the state of in-between, bearing a dual meaning that on the surface may seem incoherent. However, such duality seems to perfectly fit the overtone of the whole fourth section that begins with "Who walked between the violet and the violet / Who walked between / The various ranks of varied green" (l. 111) and continues to list various aspects of being in-between. The mere word "between" appears five times in this section and, as Christopher Ricks (1988) notices, twenty times in the whole poem, which indicates how important it is for the interpretation of "Ash Wednesday." In his book *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice* Ricks also states that "The Hollow Man" (1925) and "Ash Wednesday" (1930) are themselves "between poems" and they are not only transitional texts for the author, but they are also "meditations on the nature of transitions" (1988, 208).

For this reason, the yew, as a complex symbol, seems to be in accordance with the general multidimensional construction of the poem. At the same time, the image of the yew-tree matches the unique vision of the garden where everything appears to be lost in time or rather beyond time, as this tree symbolizes both death and immortality. The imagery of the wind shaking "a thousand whispers from the yew" (89) seems to correspond with "the wrath-bearing tree" and the tears that are shaken from it in "Gerontion" that has been discussed above. "Ash Wednesday" is a "between poem" (Ricks 1988, 208), describing the state of being divided between different aspects of the same thing ("Who walked between the violet and the violet" [88]), and the yew with its ambiguous meaning becomes an inherent and carefully selected part of the poem.

4. Lilacs, lust and longing in “Portrait of a Lady” and The Waste Land

The motif of lilacs that combine two elements of human existence – sexuality and death – is also clearly seen in “Portrait of a Lady.” Lyndall Gordon (1991) very aptly describes this poem as “a contest of voices” – the voices of masculinity and femininity that choose different vocabulary and thus images (25). The lady is associated with nature, flowers, colors, while the speaker represents the male element, introducing “an urban, masculine vocabulary – tobacco, books, the comics and the sporting page, the late events, the public clocks” (25). Gordon (1991) suggests that this poem is in fact an expression of Eliot’s attempts to find his own poetic voice by freeing himself from the language of the nineteenth century poets who “were subject to the charge of feminizing poetry” (24). Thus, apparently, the juxtaposition of the two voices which enhances the subtle sexual tension between the characters.

While analyzing this poem one should keep in mind what has been mentioned in the previous section: in Anglo-Saxon traditions lilacs, along with hawthorn, were associated with death, and as such they would not be brought into a house in many areas. Their strong scent would possibly hide the odor of a decaying corpse and was used for this purpose, thus potential reluctance to bring them into a household as a decoration. Yet, at the same time they were strongly associated with the lively, sensual month of May and sexuality itself – the latter would be especially the case for Eliot himself.

Flowers of lilac shrub are a visual dominant of the poem’s second part, strongly associated with the lady herself:

Now that lilacs are in bloom
She has a bowl of lilacs in her room
And twists one in her fingers while she talks.
“Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know
What life is, you who hold it in your hands”;
(Slowly twisting the lilac stalks) (l. 41-46)

Lilacs are mentioned several times within these six verses, which stresses their importance for the atmosphere of the lyrical situation. They seem to “suggest sensual allurements” (Miller 1977, 24) and undoubtedly they enhance the flirtatious behavior of the lady. Her gestures (she keeps twisting the stalk of the lilac [l. 43, 46]) create a tension between the characters – or at least on the side of the lyrical *I* to whom this lady clearly appeals. It becomes especially apparent when combined with the distinctive, nearly suffocating scent of lilacs, whose memory is immediately evoked in the mind of the reader. At the same time, it needs to be stressed that both the lady and the speaker directly refer to death by using phrases such as “my buried life” (l. 53) or “Well! and what if she should die some afternoon” (l. 114). In fact, it is the visions of death and loss that close the poem, leaving the reader with the feeling of helplessness.

Importantly, the image of lilacs is also present in *The Waste Land* – the poem that revolves around death, being the expression of the scars that the Great War had left on human minds and souls. As Kenner ([1965] 1966) notices, while writing this work, Eliot was concerned with various matters – from his own health and life situation to “the ruin of post-war Europe” and “a hardly exorable apprehension that two thousand years of European continuity had for the first time run dry” (125). Running dry seems to lie at the core of *The Waste Land*, especially in the first part titled “The Burial of the Dead”. In this context, the tree imagery may be crucial as directly connected with vitality, vegetation and rebirth – or, in this case, their absence or degeneration.

The way lilacs are depicted in *The Waste Land* leaves no doubt that this time the elements of understated flirtation, present in the “Portrait of a Lady”, are absent from the lyrical situation:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain (l. 1-4).

The subtlety of (potential) desire presented in “Portrait of a Lady” is lost. Lilacs are no longer twisted by a female hand but rather they grow out of the “dead land,” bringing together “memory and desire” (l. 3). Ackerley (2007) stresses the connection between the lilacs and the phrase “buried life” from “Portrait of a Lady,” claiming that this motif is revived in *The Waste Land* and that both poems are “meditations on memory and desire” (17).

Interestingly, Harold Bloom (2007) argues that in *The Waste Land* the description of lilac springing from the dead land should be seen as “the synecdoche for his [Eliot's] image for poetic voice, which he yields up to death and to the hermit thrush's song of death” (4). This interpretation should certainly be taken into account as it combines two aspects connected with lilacs. Not only does it in a natural way show the association with death (“dead land”), but also with sexuality and fertility – in this case understood as poetical potency to produce a work of art. Paradoxically, in this interpretation the lilacs appear as a sign of hope. Although this kind of hope may be seen as a rather sinister one, considering its roots and origins, it still proves that the dryness and infertility may be overcome.

In the second stanza, however, the tree imagery could not be further from hope. The speaker asks “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” (l. 19-20), planting a dark image in the reader's mind, as the roots and the branches mentioned in these two verses seem threatening. Similarly to the lilacs from the first stanza, they grow out of a hostile ground, “stony rubbish”, which may point at the ruins of the European culture, destroyed by the war. In the following verses the reader encounters “the dead tree [that] gives no shelter” (l. 23) which seem to imply that things that used to be associated with safety do not bear this meaning anymore. It

can be safely assumed that this statement refers to the horror of war that took away all the hope and stability from human lives. In the following line, the image of dryness appears once again, as the speaker says: “And the dry stone [gives] no sound of water” (l. 24). Nature no longer seems to be a source of life, being dry and dead.

The mere title, *The Waste Land*, suggests infertility and points directly at the Grail Legend and the kingdom of the Fisher King. This track leads the reader to an important source of Eliot’s inspiration, namely the book titled *From Ritual to Romance* by Jessie Weston, as the poet himself admits in the notes on *The Waste Land* by stating:

Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston’s book on the Grail legend ... Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, Miss Weston’s book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do; and I recommend it (apart from the great interest of the book itself) to any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble. (n.pag.)

What seems especially relevant for this paper are the depictions of infertility, serving as a juxtaposition to the usual meanings of the tree – life and rebirth. Weston (1919 [2003]) meticulously describes various versions of the Waste Land legend which belongs to the Matter of Britain. She points at the sickness, old age, disability, and, what follows, infertility of the Fisher King which result in the miserable condition of his country (ch. II “The Task of the Hero,” n. pag.) It is also stressed that in this particular legend one can see “the intimate relation at one time held to exist between the ruler and his land; a relation mainly dependent upon the identification of the King with the Divine principle of Life and Fertility” (ch. IX “The Fisher King, n. pag.) The figure of the Fisher King himself is invoked by Eliot in his notes to the “Burial of the Dead”, as he explains the meaning of the Tarot pack of cards. The author says that: “[t]he Man with Three Staves (an authentic member of the Tarot pack) I associate, quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself”, directing the reader’s thoughts to a specific character with all the symbolic meaning that he carries. Therefore, it should not raise any doubts that the title of Eliot’s poem has its source in Weston’s work, and thus, is deeply-rooted in the European culture. The poet draws a visible parallel between the infertility of the fictional, medieval king and his kingdom, and the state of the post-war European civilization.

The Waste Land is an excellent example of the duality of tree symbols. On the surface, they appear mainly in the context of death – either being dead themselves or having their roots in dead land. Yet, according to Bloom (2007), the lilacs symbolize the newly-found poetic voice of Eliot – and in this sense their connection with new life should not be overlooked.

As presented in these examples, the seemingly innocent lilac carries a deeper, more sinister meaning than one could initially expect. It represents both sexuality and death, making these two notions indistinguishable, captured in one image. Surprisingly, it may also bring a spark of hope standing for the discovery of a poetic voice, springing out of the dry, infertile land of a ruined civilization.

5. Three trees, birth and death in “Journey of the Magi”

Naturally, the discussion of tree-symbols in T.S. Eliot’s poetry, especially in the context of the way life is intertwined with death, would not be complete without at least mentioning “Journey of the Magi.” Despite the fact that only one tree-image is to be found there – neither vivid nor prominent, certainly easily overlooked – it both enhances the message of the poem and is the first signal of its conclusion.

“Journey of the Magi” is a poem that concentrates on one of the greatest mysteries of human existence – the unity of life and death. Although the poem obviously refers to the Christian faith and tradition, it discusses the great paradox that has been perplexing humans for ages, regardless of their cultural and religious background. The journey of the three Magi who want to honor the newly-born Jesus is a pretext to explore the problem of the connection between life and death. Their expedition aims at welcoming a new king, a new life – yet, reaching their destination does not bring them joy. On the contrary, the knowledge becomes a burden that changes their lives, thus the somber reflection of one of the magi – the lyrical I:

(...) were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death. (l. 35-43)

In the poem there are clear references to Christ’s future fate. For instance, the description of hands “dicing for silver” (l. 27) refers to the soldiers throwing dice for his clothes under the cross. At the same time it is an allusion to the thirty pieces of silver Judas Iscariot will be paid to betray Jesus. Yet, the most striking and the most inconspicuous image that foretells Christ’s destiny is “three trees on the low sky” (l. 24). The connection between the trees from the poem and the three crosses on Golgotha can be immediately seen by anyone raised in the Christian tradition or in the culture influenced by it. However, Kenner ([1965] 1966) notices that the images the Magi see are “the first moments of the Christian era, on the brink of total symbolic transfiguration” (213). For this reason, the three wise men do not fully understand the meaning of Jesus’ birth, not to mention that they pass by the symbols of the future passion without realizing what they actually see (Kenner [1965] 1966, 213).

Yet, the birth of Jesus is connected with another death that becomes apparent to the Magus (the lyrical I). This dawn of a new life becomes “hard and bitter agony” for the Magi (l. 39) and indicates death: the death of the old world, old traditions and customs,

old gods that are no longer true. The magi do not feel “at ease” (l. 41) in their own kingdoms “with an alien people” (l. 42). They seem torn between what has already happened (the birth) and what is yet to come (the death and resurrection), but they do not know the outcome. All they know is that what they used to believe in is wrong, untrue; however, as Bolton (2006) puts it, “[c]aught in a time between Christ’s birth and his death, the Magus knows the ‘old dispensation’ is no longer valid, but has not yet received the gospels which would tell him of the new dispensation of Christianity.” The two motifs – the one of being in-between and the one of the overlap between life and death – reappear once again. And the modest, short mention of trees enhances it in a surprising, yet undeniable way.

6. Conclusion

All in all, the trees play an important role in Eliot’s poetry as presented on the examples of “Gerontion,” “Ash Wednesday,” “Portrait of a Lady,” “Journey of the Magi” and excerpts from *The Waste Land*. Although their presence may at first appear coincidental, after a meticulous examination it can be noticed that the trees images carry more meaning than it is visible on the surface.

The depictions of trees add to the rich symbolism of Eliot’s poetry. What is worth stressing is the fact that in many cases a given tree species, mentioned in a few different poems, has the same or similar meanings – for instance, lilacs tend to appear in the context of sexual temptation and death. Therefore, it seems safe to conclude that Eliot is very consistent in his usage of certain images – he seems to choose them on purpose, as, apparently, they have fixed meanings. The mere fact that the tree-symbols may be read in a variety of ways creates an additional dimension of the poems. They may stand for sexuality, death, purification, rebirth and other concepts – even though some of them on the surface may seem to be contradictory. Yet, as Eliot’s poetry moves smoothly between complex aspects of human existence, they all prove to be connected. This fact constitutes one more evidence for the claim that in Eliot’s writings every word and image is meaningful. Ambiguity and multidimensionality lie at the core of his art, as the seemingly inconspicuous example of the tree confirms it.

The tree-images can appeal to the reader’s senses, become a vital part of the landscape or highlight certain features of the speaker, but also enrich the interpretation of the poem by their multidimensional symbolism which is in accordance with the general overtone of Eliot’s text. Did the poet use some of these images, having been aware of all the possible associations and historical background that this paper attempted to examine? This question cannot be answered. Yet, would a definite answer change the way the tree-depictions in Eliot’s poetry add another layer of meaning? Most probably no. The aforementioned associations might have been simply inherited as an element of his upbringing in the Anglo-Saxon culture and possibly influenced his imagination in a way he was not fully aware of. Despite his immense knowledge of culture and

tradition, Eliot could not have known everything. It needs to be noted that a century later we are still trying to understand certain customs – and at times we succeed, re-discovering the meaning of beliefs of the olden days. The concept of the Cosmic Tree may be fading away, but its remnants still linger in human imagination, deeply-rooted in ancient traditions all over the world and still present in art – whether by conscious choice or not.

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