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THE QUEST FOR THE HOLY GRAIL: THE QUEST FOR THE DIVINE OR THE QUEST TO TRANSCEND A MORAL CODE?

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T.Todorov asserts that "The quest for the Grail is a quest of a code. To find the Grail is to learn how to decipher the divine language." However, the narratives dealing with the Quest of the Grail show that the quest is not essentially the search of the same code leading to the understanding of the divine language. The Quest of the Holy Grail has been employed by many different authors to develop their own message rather than leading to a specific religious illumination, althought the elements and the plot of the Quest were closely associated with religion. There are a variety of codes in the Grail narratives that are expounded by the authors, both medieval and modern. In the progress of the Grail tradition, there has been an accumulation of various elements and events which have formed the essential symbols and motifs of the narative. These appear in all Quest narratives, but they may bear different significances leading to the development of a specific message. These symbols and motifs may be listed as: the Holy Grail, the bleeding lance, the maimed fisher king, the waste land, Chapel Perilous and the crucial question to be asked by the hero who undertakes the Quest.

At this stage it would be appropriate to take a brief look at the sources of these elements that have become the ingredients of the Quest of the Holy Grail. The origins of the Grail, the waste land and the crucial question have been traced back to Welsh and Celtic stories by various scholars(1). One of the most important sources is stated to be *The Prophetic Ecstacy of the Panthom*,

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(1) See R.S. Loomis, "The Origin of the Grail Legends," in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959) 274-94; R.S. Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol* (Cardif: U of Wales P: New York: Columbia UP, 1963) 47 ff. and D.D.R. Owen, *The Evolution of the Grail Legend* (Edinburgh and London; Oliver and Boyd, 1968).

where the supernatural king invites the hero, who has lost his way in the mists, to his abode. He appears in his hall before the hero reaches the abode and he entertains him most hospitably. The hero is offered food abundantly and later a crowned lady asks the question: "Who shall be served with the vessel?" The king's answer is that it will be given to the hero, and the prophetic list of his descendants to become king are named. Afterwards the hall and its supernatural inhibitants disappear, however, the golden cup remains. The Irish sources bear the outline of the Chapel Perilous, and the mystical vessel which are to become the prominent elements of the stories.

In Welsh literature some other elements of the Grail story are seen. In *Mabinogion* Brân, the son of Llyr, is wounded in battle by a spear and the motif of the wasting of the lands as a result of this is observed in *Branwen*. Moreover, as Loomis states the Welsh list of the thirteen treasures of Britain include the platter which is similar to the Grail [2]. The prominent motifs of the Grail legend seem to exist in the surviving Irish and Welsh stories before the emergence of the first Grail story proper, that is, Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*. The basic qualities of the story are: the intermingling of the natural and the supernatural world, the presence of the mysterious elements of the Grail, the platter in some cases and the lance, the maimed king who can be cured by the hero and the wasting of the kingdom.

Although these motifs are loosely connected with each other, special significances have not been assigned to them. In addition to the pagan meanings attached to these motifs, Christian mysticism has also contributed to the layers of meaning. Loomis states that this second layering of meaning had taken place before it reached Chrétien[3]. Hence, although not definitive, the Christian associations of these elements may be listed, as Fox formulates them: the lance, referring to that of the Roman soldier Longinus, which he used to pierce Christ's side, the blood on the lance symbolizing the eternal and universal nature of the Redemption, the Grail either being the vessel used in the Last Supper or the vessel in which Christ's blood was collected; the silver dish, the one that received the Host at Holy Communion [4].

(2) Loomis, "The Origin", 280.
(3) Loomis, "The Origin", 294.
(4) John Fox, *A Literary History of France* (London: Ernst Benn; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974) v, I, 166.

As can be deduced from the brief study of the origins of the Grail legend, there is not one definite source embodying a set of all of the motifs with specific meaning assigned, but there is a cluster of mystical motifs which the poet may rely on to expose his message. Owen repeatedly draws attention to the method of transmission of the Irish and Welsh stories, in that the poets were using the motifs and the material available to them to formulate the stories rather than creating anew (5). This statement is applicable to almost all the Grail stories, whether medieval or modern, because they are using already established structures and elements to express different themes. The process of the artist making use of the "tools" of former works to signify his own meaning and not inventing new sets for his purpose is defined by Levi-Strauss as "bricolage" (6). Similar to a *bricoleur* the author is making use of former material remains of preceding writers to construct his structure. In the process of construction the *bricoleur* inevitably puts his own design into the work. The authors of the Quest of the Grail story have turned to the "tools" listed above to reconstruct their own structures and meaning through the ages. Although basically the set of tools remains the same their significances have varied, as opposed to the general impression one may get that the Grail stories are all related to the process of the hero's divine enlightenment.

The reading of these narratives requires a process of interpretation and deciphering of the values and significances attached to the tools since they vary considerably at the hands of different authors. Moreover, the mystical nature of the tools of the Grail legend has encouraged both medieval and modern writers to develop an allegorical frame of mind. In the Middle Ages there was a tendency to read for higher significances; the Old Testament was interpreted so as to foreshadow the New Testament, and the secular classics were re-read for spiritual edification. This tendency for the search of a higher level of meaning is captured by White in a deliberately comic from in the instance of Reverend Sidebottom's interpretation of the story concerning the giant. The body of Pallas, son of Evander, is lying uncorrupted and a candle is burning by it which cannot be

(5) Owen, 15, 21.
(6) Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1962 and 1966) 16ff.

affected by wind or water unless air comes through a hole made in the candle at the bottom of the flame [7]. The story is interpreted so as to reveal a spiritual lesson by Reverend Sidebottom. He immediately equates the giant with Adam, since both are free from corruption; and the giant's wound is stated to symbolize the transgression of the divine command. However, there seems to be a few loose ends in the interpretation such as the candle and the needle, which Reverend Sidebottom explains at a second attempt. He interprets the candle as the eternal punishment and the needle as the Passion of Christ which extinguishes it. The allegorical frame of mind of Reverend Sidebottom can be observed in the writers and readers of the Grail Quest, thoug as illustrated in the treatment of White the whole process is not taken seriously in the modern view.

A closer study of a selection of medieval and modern Grail stories can illustrate the various uses the tools have been put to. The first Grail story proper that has survived is Chrétien's *Perceval*. Basically the romance covers the education of a knight, namely, Perceval who is in the beginning a mere naive country bumpkin. In the romance we observe the advancement of Perceval from a wild creature of the woods to a refined courtly knight. If we may say so it is the quest of chivalry and kinghthood not the Quest of the Holy Grail. Although the romance is in an incomplete state, the code that Perceval deciphers is the code of knighthood and the religious aspects of the chivalric ideal, not the quest for divine knowledge. The grail episodes are subordinate to the education of Perceval in worldly conduct. The unrefined boy sets out to become a knight after his encounter with the knights in the forest. In *Perceval* the hero is shown on his physical and moral journey from complete ignorance to knighthood. Although he is dazed by the sight of the knights he meets, he cannot even tell what they are. In the first stage of his education he earns his armour, the first material essential to a knight by his encounter with the red knight. However, before he can be knighted he must be educated in the martial arts which is undertaken by the kind host of the castle, Gornemant of Gohort. His adventures with the lady in the tent clearly illustrate his ignorance in two more aspects of the chivalric ideal, his attitude to women and his

(7) T.H. White, *The Sword in the Stone* (London: Readers,Union and Collins, 1939) 290-91.

recognition of and obedience to the Church. He proves his military prowress by overcoming Engygeron and Clamadeu, but his treatment of women and refined behaviour have not been perfected yet; for example he leaves without taking leave of Blancheflour [8]. As Owen remarks the romance is constructed so as to show Perceval righting the wrongs that he has done in the flow of events [9]. He departs from the castle to go to his mother, but comes upon the Grail Castle. At this point the cluster of related elements come into the romance. He meets the Fisher King who is wounded. The king invites him to the castle and there Perceval witnesses the multiple processions of the bleeding lance and the Holy Grail, however, not having earned a total initiation yet, he fails to ask the crucial question. The next day he finds himself deserted in the castle. He later learns that if he had asked the question both the Fisher King, his father and the wasting lands would have been saved. His imperfection has caused his inability to direct the question. But at the end of the romance, in the from we have it, he does not give up and he sets off in search of the Grail to right his last wrong, although the damsel who came to the court states that it is too late. The resolution of Perceval to find the Grail and to ask the question relating to the lance and the Grail [10] are symbolic of his quest of perfection. The romance is inconclusive and towards the end the adventures of Gawain overpower the story of Perceval; still, basically, the story is the education of a perfect knight. The Grail Quest plays a partial role in the moral, social and spiritual edification of the knight and does not bear a key to divine language. Although the bleeding lance and the Grail embody Christian mysticism, the religious theme is not dominant. The Grail has the qualities of the vessel of the Eucharist as the wounded father of the Fisher King has been sustained in life only by feeding from it. The Christian elements have been woven into the story but they are still merely the trappings of the "tools".

The various continuations written to Chrétien's *Perceval* were more religious. The Grail Quest was treated fully in the *Quest of the Holy Grail* and it is employed to illustrate the attainment of

(8) Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval* in *Arthurian Romances* (London: Dent, 1987) trans, D.D.R. Owen, 382.
(9) Owen, 153.
(10) Chretien, 437.

spiritual perfection. In Loomis' terminology it is a "Cistercian allegory"[11]. as it takes the Grail for the monastic ideal. The story is interpreted in a way similar to that of Reverend Sidebottom's. Not only is the process of deciphering undertaken by the reader but also the significance of the allegorical events, dreams and emblems are continually explained in the narrative by various personages of religious calling.

Galahad has become the hero and he has been set up as a second Messiah to show the way to salvation. He is the chosen hero and this is proved by the test of the Seat Perilous, on which he sits without any harm, [12] and the test of the sword which he passes by drawing the sword out from the floating stone which Lancelot, Gawain, Perceval and the others failed to do [13]. Later the Grail appears before the Knights of the Round Table and all are given food by it [14]. The Grail symbolizes the Grace of God. As Fanni Bogdanow illustrates in detail, according to the Cistercian doctrine man can seek God only after receiving the gift of His Grace [15]. The visitation of the Grail upon the Knights of the Round Table is a second chance given to them to seek God, having all received the gift. All the kinghts decide to set out on the Quest of the Holy Grail, but most of them have drifted to sin and cannot even perceive the meaning of the Quest. Even Arthur cannot grasp the meaning and laments the departure of his knights [16]. Similar to the blemished knights he is immersed in worldly values and cannot perceive the spiritual importance of the Gift. He has used chivalry to pursue worldly honour and companionship. The knights fail in achieving the Quest since they cannot rise to the spiritual plane. Only Galahad, Perceval and Bors can achieve it and Lancelot gets a partial glimpse of the Grail due to his repentance. Lancelot's sin is not only his affair with Guinevere, but also the purpose of his chivalric deeds which he puts in his own words as: "For her love alone I accomplished the exploits with which the whole world rings". [17] He has not put

(11) Loomis, *The Grail*, 165 ff.
(12) *The Quest of the Holy Grail* trans. P.M.Matarasso (Middlesex: Penguin, 1969) 37.
(13) Quest, 35.
(14) Quest, 44.
(15) Fanni Bogdanov, "An Interpretation of the Meaning and Purpose of the Vulgate Queste *del Saint Graal* in the Light of the Mystical Theology of St Bernard, "in *The Changing Face of Arthurian Romance*, Alison Adams et al. (Suffolk: Boydel and Brewer, 1986) 23-46.
(16) Quest, 45.
(17) Quest, 89.

his chivalry to use for the cause of the Church but for his own worldly love. He has not only lost his virginity, which is essential, but has also lost all sense of purpose. The Grail Knights Perceval and Bors are tested and they pass the test. Althought it is theologically impossible since the Fall, by definition only the sinless can achieve to see the Grail and play a role in the healing of the maimed king and hence help to put an end to the wasting of the lands. Galahad's first curing instance is with King Mordrain, although the king dies his blindness is cured and miraculously his wounds are healed [18]. The other healing instance occurs after the apperance of the Grail. Galahad rubs the legs of the maimed king with the blood he has taken from the bleeding lance and the king is healed.

The significance of the Grail is furthered when the Eucharist is re-enacted only to be parttaken by the perfect and the sinless. The number of the chosen knights is twelve, the cup and the bleeding lance appear. The priest takes bread from the vessel but the figure of a child descends and enters it. Moreover, the Grail acquires the meaning of the platter out of which Christ ate the Paschal lamb. Later these items disappear from the land of Logres since their value cannot be perceived by the sinful inhabitants.

In the *Quest* the Grail and the bleeding lance have been employed for religious allegory. The Grail variously stands for the Grace of God and later the vessel of the Host in the mystic vision. The emphasis is on the universal call for reform and self discipline, for union with God. Although the narrative is conducted in terms of chivalry it denounces the worldly institution and demands complete spiritual submission to celestial chivalry.

Malory's treatment of the grail theme cannot take the *Quest's* author's perspective since the *Morte Dartur* is in a sense a glorification of the institution and the values of chivalry. Mahoney briefly defines Malory's treatment of the Grail story saying that the spiritual values of the *Quest* have been transplanted to fifteenth century England "where secular and spiritual pursuits could be considered complementary rather than competitive elements of a knightly life"[19]. Malory takes the

(18) *Quest*, 269.
(19) Dhira B. Mahoney, "The Truest and Holiest Tale: Malory's Transformation of *La Queste del Saint Graal*" in *Studies in Malory* ed. James W. Spisak (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publ., 1985) 110.

Quest and he omits much of the doctrinary parts but retains most of the narrative structure. However, in his quest for higher perfection although Lancelot cannot achieve to see the Grail fully he is granted a partial sight of it and he does not come out to be a complete failure due to Malory's presentation. Similar to the "tools" of the *Quest* the Waste land, the healing of the maimed king and the Holy Grail are the elements of the narrative, but the Grail seems to lose many facets of its meanings assigned to it in the *Quest* and it is given an Eucharistic significance related to a higher level of perfection. The treatment of the perfection symbolised by the sighting of the Grail is secularized and does not embody the rejection of worldly valour and knightly perfection in *Morte Dartur*. Malory uses the themes and elements of the quest narrative according to his own conviction of secular chivalry because he incorporates the Quest into the Arthurian legend. As Moorman points out, the Quest of the Holy Grail should be taken as a part of *Morte Dartur* and not as an isolated story on its own. [20] The Grail adventure is used as an exhibition of levels of perfection in knighthood with Galahad ranking as the highest both in the earthly and the spiritual domain, Perceval and Bors following him and Lancelot the best of the earthly knights. Galahad embodies spiritual perfection and since he is sinless he puts an end to the boiling of the water which symbolises lechery [21], experiences the spiritual encounter with the Grail and heals the maimed king [22]. Lancelot, the pride of the Round Table, being the best of the earthly knights does not fare so badly in the Quest;he shows humility and readiness for repentance all through the adventures. When the maiden announces that he is no longer the best knight after Galahad has drawn the sword out of the stone, he answers: "I know well I was never none of the beste" [23]. His sins are specified as lechery and not being stable instead of a general condemnation as in the *Quest*. His readiness for repentance, humility and the partial vision of the Grail granted to him rank him as one of the knights who return from the Quest to Arthur's court in some degree of success. As Benson states, Malory's theme in the Quest of the Grail is to show that "the

(20) Charles Moorman," 'The Tale of the Sankgreall': Human Frailty" in *Malory's Originality* ed. R.M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1964) 185.
(21) Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugene Vinaver, 2nd ed. (Oxford: UP, 1971) 600.
(22) Malory, 604.
(23) Malory, 520.

spiritual is the greater but not the only realm of the good and glorious" [24]. If we accept *Morte Dartur* as a work in which the diverse sections contribute to and foreshadow eachother this message becomes even more clear. In the book of *Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere* he is the knight who heals Sir Urry [25]who may also be interpreted as another figure of the maimed king. Launcelot undertakes this adventure in the name of God and he is successful. Hence, in Malory's version of the Grail story the emblems are used to define the knightly code but in a wider spectrum so as to cover many levels of perfection, both earthly and spiritual.

The later treatments of the Grail story show even greater variety in approach and aim. In Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* the Quest has been stripped of all its positive qualities. In "The Holy Grail" Tennyson sets up the Quest as a threat to the well-being of the society. In the *Idylls* King Arthur is portrayed as the idealized Christian king who is actively pursuing the well-being of the society. In contrast to the traditional figure of King Arthur who is seated in court presiding over his knights, Tennyson's Arthur is not present at Camelot when the Grail makes its first appearance because:

> 'the King,
> Was not in hall, for early that same day,
> Scaped thro' a cavern from a bandit hold,
> An outraged maiden sprang into the hall
> Crying on help...
> ... so the King arose and went
> To smoke the scandalous hive of those wild bees
> That make such honey in his realm [26].

For Tennyson the society can be served through active undertaking of good deeds and the perfect figure embodying these ideals is King Arthur who is represented in the sculpture

> with a crown,
> And peak'd wings pointed to the Northern star.
>
> ("The Holy Grail" 239-40)

(24) Larry D. Benson, *Malory's Morte Dartur* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1976) 219.
(25) Malory, 668.
(26) Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1983) *The Holy Grail*, 11.205-215.

Although King Arthur acknowledges the spiritual perfection of Galahad who is depicted as the only one suitable to undertake the personal spiritual quest, the approved route for the other knights is direct work undertaken for the socitey; Arthur says to Galahad:

> 'for such
> As thou art is the vision, not for these.
>
> ("The Holy Grail" 93-94)

While the Grail Quest will disrupt the ideal order established the

> ... chance of noble deeds will come and go
> Unchallenged, while ye follow wandering fires
> Lost in quagmire!
>
> ("The Holy Grail" 318-20)

The Waste Land image dominates the tale of Perceval; in three instances he walks up to reach persons, they crumble into dust and he fears that the Grail will also turn into dust, signifying the futility of the Quest. Althought they achieve the vision of the Grail, only Galahad grows wings and departs. Moreover, the healing virtues of the knight and the Grail do not appear. The whole Quest is depicted in a negative light because it distracts the knights from their true duties to the society by "leaving human wrongs to right themselves" ("The Holy Grail" 894). Arthur is presented as a Christian king and the nature of religious activities are demanded to be unifying and it is illustrated that "concentration on private religious experience... is a dereliction of duty" (27). Tennyson employs the Grail legend to express his views relating to his contemporary society and comments on the real duties of a leader. As the Quest represents the pursuit of the personal at the expense of public duties, the significances attached to the Grail and the Quest are completely different.

In the process of studying the various different interpretations of the Grail Quest and the symbols they embody it is necessary to mention Jessie Weston's work *From Ritual to Romance*,although it is not the reinterpretation of the Grail story in fictional from but a study of its origins and the meanings of all the elements associated with it, because it had a considerable influence on the

(27) Paul Turner, *Tennyson* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976) 154.

modern re-use of the Quest motif. Weston's approach to the matter is contrary to the poet's treatment as she explicitly studies the meaning of each symbol and traces them to their primitive ritual origins. However, it does remain to be a work of *bricolage* since it is using the "tools" of former stories for the coherent explanations she provides. She traces the origins of the grail, the lance and the quest hero and the maimed king to the fertility rites of pre-christian cultures. The origin of the rejuvenation of the maimed king is shown to be in the fertility rites of Asian, classical Roman and Greek cultures as the rebirth of the consort of the female goddess. The Waste Land is also associated with the fertility rites; due to the close connection between the king and his lands his failing powers are reflected in the wasting of the lands. Moreover, Weston assigns phallic and reproductive significances to the lance and the Grail. She also tries to explain the name of the Fisher King, although there are Celtic and Christian interpretations she formulates a new theory stating that the Fisher King was associated with life giving deities as fish was the symbol of life long before Christian significances were assigned to it. Weston's accounts of the origins and development of the Grail legend is somewhat unreliable; she freely draws from Asian and European fertility rites to support her account of the symbols. As C.S. Lewis states works of literature do not have to be necessarily bound to anthrophological meanings [28] the works such as the Grail stories have become richer in employing their *own* significances to certain sets of elements.

T.S. Eliot was influenced by Jessie Weston's above mentioned work in composing his poem *The Waste Land* as he states in his notes [29]. In general the poem's theme is the stagnation in the modern society between the two World Wars necetitating a rejuvenation morally and spiritually. The title of the poem refers to the decaying state of the society as in the wasting lands of the Grail quest. The poem opens in spring, April; the month of rebirth related to the fertility season as stated by Weston, but it brings no life as the images in this section are of "dead trees"(1,23) and the absence of water (1,24). Man is trapped in a limbo between life and death: "I was neither/Living nor dead" (11,39-40), struck dumb

(28) C.S.Lewis, "The Anthropological Approach" in *Selected Literary Essays* ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969) 310-11.
(29) T.S.Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969) 76.

and helpless in the modern Waste Land. The god of fertility who has been buried and whose coming to life will rejuvenate the land is being awaited, but does not show any life yet in the first section of the poem. The Tarot cards which were used in ancient times to predict the freeing of waters according to Weston's account [30], to cure the wasting of the lands are now being used for a debased act, namely, fortune telling by Madame Sossostris (LL, 42ff). In "The Game of Chess" the modern Waste Land is illustrated in two different sections of the modern society; in an upper class and a lower working class situation, where in both, life has lost all its meaning and has become a mere set of actions. In the third section of the poem Eliot extends the Waste Land image and refers to the maimed king. The protagonist is reminiscent of the fisher king of Chrétien's *Perceval* who is also depicted fishing in a river. There is no cure stated explicitly for Eliot's persona, he hears "the rattle of bones" (LL, 186, 195), that is, no spiritual regeneration is hinted at. Moreover, Eliot seems to refer to the boiling well of lust of the quest in Malory as illustrated both in the title and the relation of the typist, where love no longer exists and it is merely an act of lust. Instead of the spiritual initiation that was to be aided by the Smyrna merchant this offer is depicted as a homosexual advance which can bring no fertility but only sterility. In the last section of the poem where the questers reach the Chapel Perilous the promise of the freeing of waters and the curing of the lands are introduced; with the thunder a sign of relief and rain comes. The crowing of the cock introduces the coming of the rain. As the cock is a well established symbol of spiritual awakening Eliot may be referring to the necessity of spiritual awareness for the rejuvenation of the modern society.

Eliot's main motifs of the Grail legend that are used in the poem are basicly drawn from Weston's interpretations. The main motif he uses is the decay in the Waste Land and the relief sought in the freeing of waters, that is, symbolically also the curing of the king. But there is no mention of the other elements of the Quest. Eliot is also working with the "tools" established before him to convey the spiritual and moral depression of his age.

From the brief consideration of some medieval and modern works making use of the elements and episodes of the Grail legend

(30) Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (New York: Doubleday, 1957) 78.

it can be observed that the treatment of the legend does not necessarily lead to the perception of the divine language as Todorov claims. On the contrary, the Grail is assigned various different meanings and the hero's success in seing the Garil functions as a degree of attainment of the values set up by the poet, desirable or otherwise. The elements of the Grail Quest have become the "tools" of the *bricoleur*, as Levi-Strauss states, that the artists use to build their own structures for various purposes. The process of *bricolage* involving this legend is still continuing as can be seen from the works ranging from films to novels that are produced making use of these "tools".

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