



**From Ritual to Romance [with Biographical  
Introduction] (Cosimo Classics Mythology and  
Folklore)**

*Jessie Laidlay Weston*

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## **From Ritual to Romance [with Biographical Introduction] (Cosimo Classics Mythology and Folklore) Details**

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# **From Reader Review From Ritual to Romance [with Biographical Introduction] (Cosimo Classics Mythology and Folklore) for online ebook**

## **Julia Gordon-Bramer says**

I've been reading and reviewing books from Sylvia Plath's library, and decided to explore *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston (thanks to St. Louis poet Matthew Freeman for gifting this to me years ago). Notes on LibraryThing say Plath read this book 1954-55, wrote "Sylvia Plath 1958" inside of it, and that there is "much underlining" by Plath. I have yet to go to Emory University, where Plath's copy is held, to see exactly what was underlined, but I'm excited to make that trip sometime soon.

The author of *From Ritual to Romance*, Jessie Weston, died in 1928 before Plath was born. Weston was a contemporary of the Cambridge Ritualists, a group of classical scholars influenced by myth and ritual. This movement carried on into Plath's generation and greatly impressed her. In her first year at Cambridge, Plath wrote, "here all are mystics in various ways" (*Unabridged Journals*, 221). As a woman in the man's world of late 19th century Cambridge, Weston was judged by many to be a Theosophist, writing about mystical and occult philosophies. And of course, these philosophies were not taken seriously by Academia at large. The public charge of Theosophy (as a crime!) against Weston came after T.S. Eliot listed *From Ritual to Romance* as crucial to understanding *The Waste Land*.

A main point in *From Ritual to Romance* is that the Holy Grail is not a Christian symbol, but probably pre-Celtic/Pagan, and that the Grail is symbol of self-actualization (the alchemical journey, according to Jung, Campbell, and others). Weston's academic reputation suffered because she didn't espouse the traditional views of Arthurian legend. This was a fun book for me to read because, Lord, do I know the feeling of breaking from tradition with my work on Sylvia Plath (my books are *Fixed Stars Govern a Life: Decoding Sylvia Plath*, 2014, Stephen F. Austin State University Press, and the *Decoding Sylvia Plath* series on Magi Press). Nevertheless, Weston is considered a primary Arthurian scholar, and Plath loved this book, *From Ritual to Romance*. [Plath also read another book by Weston in her Medieval Literature class, 1952-53].

Like many of the books from Plath's library which I'm reviewing, *From Ritual to Romance* captures attention from the first unnumbered page before the Preface. On the first page is a quote (from Cornford, *Origins of Attic Comedy*), which I'll paraphrase, with my own Plath angle in brackets: We can demand more evidence to prove mysticism, or, we can see how mysticism does not conflict with known truths [about Plath], and how mysticism correlates and explains so much [of Plath's work].

Ah, but today is an age of willful ignorance. There's a delicious section beginning on page 67 where the author blasts scholars for their specifications, missing the bigger picture.

On the next page, Weston goes on to say about most scholarship: "The result obtained is always quite satisfactory to the writer, often plausible, sometimes in a measure sound, but it would defy the skill of the most synthetic genius to co-ordinate the results obtained, and combine them in one harmonious whole. They are like pieces of a puzzle, each of which has been symmetrically cut and trimmed, till they lie side by side, un-fitting and un-related." (68) I envision Sylvia reading this chapter, thinking of that whole, working her words always in ritual and in context to the larger picture of everything around her.

In the Preface, the author writes of owing a great debt to Sir James Frazer, who wrote *The Golden Bough*,

also beloved to Plath. In *From Ritual to Romance*, Weston says she had the goal of writing about the “border-land between Christianity and Paganism.” She wrote:

“I found, not only the final link that completed the chain of evolution from Pagan Mystery to Christian Ceremonial, but also proof of that wider significance I was beginning to apprehend. The problem involved was not Folk-lore, not even one of Literature, but of Comparative Religion in the widest sense.”

We Plathians know how much religion interested Plath. She studied, practiced and used its philosophies, tools and rites without fully embracing any one.

*From Ritual to Romance* is not a long book, but its intimidating list of foreign topics in scholarly language is not light reading. This is, however, exciting, heady stuff for the introspective, mystically-inclined literary buff, such as Plath. Here are just a few of the subjects in *From Ritual to Romance* which I first found in *Fixed Stars Govern A Life: Decoding Sylvia Plath: the Hindu Rig-Veda*, the importance of Waste-Land motif from Arthurian legend, The Holy Grail as Aryan tradition (think of Plath’s poetic Nazism here), the festival of Soma, the symbol of the root, nature cults, creation stories, Greek mythology, Nature cults, Babylonians, Celts, modern parallels with myth, African tribes and culture, The Medicine Man, the elements, The Fisher King, Fish as a Life symbol across Asian religions, the Leviathan, Jewish and Christian symbolism, Irish Finn mythology, fish as the goddess Venus, the danger of speaking of mystical secrets, exoteric and esoteric elements, Neo-Platonism, Mithraism, Life Principle and the Logos, Vegetation cults as vehicles of high spiritual teaching, Christian legend, folk-tales, women not admitted to initiation, and The Templars (Freemasons).

I especially found the whole Aryan aspect fascinating. When Weston wrote of early Aryan literature and drama paving the way for western literature, she actually referred to a primitive Indo-Iranian culture, although this is never really explained in the book. In fact, the source of the word Aryan is probably a reference to Iran. Yet after some 19th century misinterpretations of the Hindu Rig Veda, and then the Nazis adopting the word as the name for a superior race, Plath (and millions of others) likely had the impression that Aryan referenced Germanic culture. No matter the origin, Pagan, Celtic, Norse, Ancient Greek or Babylonian, what Weston and other mythologists point out is that the legends and rituals are essentially the equivalent. Plath knew that much.

One chapter of *From Ritual to Romance* is entirely about Symbolism, including symbols of the Fertility cult (which happen to coincide with those of the tarot: Cup, Lance, Sword, Stone or Dish), the cauldron, the Four Suits of the Tarot, origin of the Tarot, and use of symbols in Magic. The *Decoding* work goes on to build the case that these symbols were purposefully embedded in Plath’s work, to activate upon the reader’s subconscious. It seems to have worked.

Weston suggests that strictly secret ritual was recorded and repackaged (my modern words) as myth. Her work was a complement to Frazer’s focus on magic, religion and science and how magic and science are used to control nature. The book’s Foreword, written by Robert A. Segal, says that religion, falling between magic and science, provides both myth and rituals. Magic, however, “involves no gods, it also involves no myths. There is ritual...” (xxiii). Plath, with her sort of atheistic spirituality, would have been tempted by that perspective.

Segal goes on to say that Weston contends that “literature comes from myth, not that it is myth. [...] the keenest difference between literature and myth is that literature stands severed from ritual.” I think this is the problem with the masses’ perception of Plath. Plath’s work is literature. It comes from myth, and occultism, but it is not these things itself. Occultism and myth may even be used to construct a literary work, but a Plath

poem is not going to be able to be used as an occult tool by anyone other than Plath. It was written by her to work on her audience. All magic stops there.

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### **Miriam says**

Weston examines textual sources and folk practices from a variety of cultures, arguing that the Arthurian legend of the Grail is a continuation of pre-Christian Vegetation rituals.

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### **Brandon says**

This book is basically useless when it comes to explaining T.S. Eliot, but what isn't? It is also practically useless as a book of criticism on the Grail legends. However, it is a really great book on the occult. Much of her information about then-modern occult practice came from Yeats, which is hilarious, and her research into the topic is really great. Most other writers on the subject from her era are always saying things like, "If you know what I mean then you know what I mean," and otherwise being spooky and secretive. Not Weston. This book is therefore a good companion to the books of Arthur Edward Waite, et al, and way less irritatingly vague.

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### **David Withun says**

I doubt that anyone who has read this book since 1922 has read it for any other reason than its mention by T. S. Eliot in his notes to "The Waste Land" as one of the two books (along with Frazier's *Golden Bough*) which most inspired that great poem. With that said, it is a surprisingly good read in its own right. While a great deal of the scholarship is outdated and therefore cannot be trusted as an accurate description of the history of the ideas and stories discussed, the story that Weston tells and her ideas regarding its plausible historical development is interesting enough to possess a certain beauty that renders it fascinating to read even if ultimately untrue in the academic sense of the word.

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### **Mark Lederer says**

Sort of a follow up to Eliot's The Waste Land

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### **Joseph Carrabis says**

Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* is an excellent read for cultural anthropologists, folklorists, psychologists and sociologists interested in the transmission of ideas through cultures (talk about memes! Talk about the childhood game of telephone (which nobody plays any more, I'm sure)!). It's a deep read that requires fluency in several languages to appreciate fully and it's still worth a read if all you can manage is English.

Fantasy writers interested in the Grail stories, King Arthur stories, the origins of medieval romance, et cetera, will also find this a good read, I'm sure.

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### **Jonathan says**

Complete rot. Gains an extra star simply for the great works of Modernism it engendered. Riddled with assumptions, huge leaps of "logic" and desperate attempts to make evidence fit her thesis.

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### **Carlos Ortiz says**

This book belongs on the bookshelf of anyone seriously interested in the evolution of religion. It is well-documented with plenty of footnotes. The book includes an index that any researcher could find useful.

Although well written, as some readers have commented on different reviews, the book uses a style of English that is no longer common on either side of the Atlantic. I imagine it was the norm when Jessie L. Weston (1850–1928) wrote this book (1920). I typed one of Weston's long sentences (from page 62) in Grammarly.com. I selected "General Academic" as the style to correct. It received a score of 5 out of 100. Most likely, that would have been the standard for her time.

Other readers commented on Weston's frequent use of Latin and French words without any translation. There is also German. For example, on page 114 there is a paragraph with 179 words in four sentences. Out of the 179 words, four are Latin or French words. Although most are recognizable to a monolingual readership, words such as "Manqué," might require a dictionary. And let me not forget "gar keinem Verhältniss" (of all proportion). I would assume that when she wrote this book, many English-speaking book lovers could also read French and Latin, and possibly Ancient Greek and German, without much difficulty.

"In Indian cosmogony Manu finds a little fish in the water in which he would wash his hands; it asks, and received, his protection, asserting that when grown to full size it will save Manu from the universal deluge. This is Lhasa, the greatest of all fish." (Pg. 126) Now, that story from the ancient Mahabharata, which Weston quotes, reminds me of more than one Bible story. Notwithstanding the limitations that Weston's style may present to today's audience, I would stress that this little book is a jewel for the serious researcher.

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### **Elizabeth says**

Let's see, I've owned this book for exactly 20 years. I reckon this is at least the FOURTH time I've read it and I STILL don't really understand it, and I have this inner conviction that Miss Weston has actually made it all up, but. But. Something in it deeply appeals to me. The idea that the whole grail legend hearkens back to something more primitive and connected with the earth makes sense to me, in exactly the way it seems obvious to me that both Peredur and Perceval are springboard tellings of an older story.

I like rereading my marginalia in this book; obviously over the years I've had more than one reason for reading it, and the notes appear in layers. There are references to Eliot and then there are references to an unpublished novel of my own and then there are references to my current work of fiction, only a few

transformations back. I must admit that, reading it this time, I am pretty sure Miss Weston is not going to tell me anything new.

It's comfort reading, in the way neat gin might be comfort food if you were a serious alcoholic and didn't mind the burn on the way down. Consider this excerpt (underlined, in the book):

"The Exoteric side of the cult gives us the Human, the Folk-lore, elements--the Suffering King; the Waste Land; the effect upon the Folk; the task that lies before the hero; the group of Grail symbols. The Esoteric side provides us with the Mystic Meal, the Food of Life, connected in some mysterious way with a Vessel which is the centre of the cult...a double initiation into the source of the lower and higher spheres of life; the ultimate proof of the successful issue of the final test in the restoration of the King."

GAWD. And I am trying to sublimate this into a KID'S BOOK. idiot idiot idiot

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ETA: Goodreads comments that "None of your friends have read From Ritual to Romance." geez, wot a surprise.

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### **Dan says**

Weston compares and contrasts several versions of the Grail legend, and interprets the symbolism in terms of the fertility rituals discussed by James George Frazer in his work *The Golden Bough*. A serious work of academic analysis, the book was a significant influence on T.S. Eliot, who employed its ideas in his poem "The Waste Land."

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### **Andrew says**

Medieval Grail romances interpreted as preserving details of Mystery cults going back thousands of years. It's an interesting idea. Weston's argument is mostly based on similarities between elements of the Grail story and known features of ancient nature religions and various occult traditions. How these ideas were passed on from prehistory to medieval times is less clear.

"The King, though regarded with reverence, must not be allowed to become old or feeble, lest, with the diminishing vigour of the ruler, the cattle should sicken, and fail to bear increase, the crops should rot in the field and men die in ever growing numbers. One of the signs of failing energy is the King's inability to fulfill the desires of his wives, of whom he has a large number. When this occurs the wives report the fact to the chiefs, who condemn the King to death forthwith, communicating the sentence to him by spreading a white cloth over his face and knees during his mid-day slumber. Formerly the King was starved to death in a hut, in company with a young maiden but (in consequence, it is said, of the great vitality and protracted suffering of one King) this is no longer done.'

'Some years ago, in the course of my reading, I came across a passage where certain knights of Arthur's court, riding through the forest, come upon a herb "which belonged to the Grail." Unfortunately the reference, at the time I met with it, though it struck me as curious, did not possess any special significance, and either I omitted to make a note of it, or entered it in a book which, with sundry others, went mysteriously

astray in the process of moving furniture. In any case, though I have searched diligently I have failed to recover the passage, but I note it here in the hope that one of my readers may be more fortunate.'

'Yet, on the basis of the theory now set forth, is it not possible that there may be a real foundation of historical fact at the root of this wildly picturesque tale? May it not be simply a poetical version of the disappearance from the land of Britain of the open performance of an ancient Nature ritual?'

'But the ritual, in its higher, esoteric form was still secretly observed, and the traditions alike of its disappearance as a public cult, and of its persistence in some carefully hidden strong-hold, was handed on in the families of those who had been, perhaps still were, officiants of these rites.'

'At the risk of startling my readers I must express my opinion that it was because the incidents recorded were a reminiscence of something that actually happened .... For this is the story of an initiation (or perhaps it would be more correct to say the test of fitness for an initiation) carried out on the astral plane, and reacting with fatal results upon the physical.'

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### **Fyo says**

I didn't actually finish this book, I got halfway through and no longer needed it for the paper I was writing. This book is pretty weird. And not particularly good. Like most people, I read this book in a vain attempt to understand *The Waste Land*. Turns out Eliot was in part trolling us, it wasn't all that based on it, but that doesn't really matter.

As I said, this book is weird. It theorizes the Grail myth comes from a now-forgotten vegetation cult, which immediately makes me ask if it's forgotten how do you know it existed. Weston kind of wanders around in circles in her discussion. Her support is practically nil, or it's hard to read. The edition I got through Gutenberg had the original version with untranslated French and German, which was not helpful at all. Fortunately the copy I found on Archive.org was a later edition and translated. Still, she doesn't make it easy to identify her sources, like telling what specific story she mentions.

Unless you're into *The Waste Land* or have some kind of weird Arthurian theory fetish, I don't really recommend this book.

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### **Erik Graff says**

Having already read Wolfram, Th Malory and Chretien, I was ready for some analysis. This book had been recommended by a popular professor at Grinnell College and was being much read about campus (along with, it might be added, Graves' *The White Goddess*). Weston did a great job in tying together the various grail legends into a coherent scheme related to a contemporary theory of the development of religious belief out of ritual practice. I thoroughly enjoyed this book and have recommended it to others throughout the years since reading it.

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## Frederic says

Gonzo Grail interpretation but lots of fun...

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## Pam says

This is, top to bottom, an excellent and extremely informative book. Ms. Weston takes an in-depth look into the history behind grail quest literature, looking in part at some of the Arthurian legends, folk-lore, mythology, and the history and alterations of religion.

While having read at least some medieval literature does help put a lot of what Weston says into clearer context, such readings aren't really necessary to understand the ideas and arguments she puts forth. I've studied parts of this book in the past, as I've read pieces like Chretien de Troyes's *Arthurian Romances* and T.S. Eliot's *"The Waste Land,"* and I finally got a good chance to go back and read it cover to cover. I was absolutely fascinated by the ideas of the Nature Ritual and initiation, and the overlapping features of the Nature and Mystery cults, Mithraic belief, the Messianic Feast, and Christianity. The blending of folk lore, mythology, history, psychology, religion, and good ol' imagination in the formation and continuation of the grail romances is simply astounding, and it isn't easy to see how far-ranging and intertwined such themes really are in medieval literature (and by tradition, in more modern pieces as well) -- and why such pieces arouse such fascination -- until they're examined in such a context as Weston postulates. Her theories are straightforward and well-put, and she provides plenty of textual evidence to both support and illustrate her points. I was as enthralled with Weston's book as I usually am by Arthurian legend and other medieval works (and trust me -- I LOVE such writings!).

I would absolutely recommend this book to any and all readers who enjoy history, culture, religion, religious history, paganism, Christianity, Judaism, medieval literature, King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, Grail Quests, mythology, folk-lore, and the like. For those who enjoy this book, I would also recommend Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, as it discusses in much more depth many of the ideas that Weston relies on. Both are excellent and highly informative studies in literature, folk-lore, mythology, history, and culture.

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