

Misogyny and the Religious Sensibility in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes

Misogynie et sensibilité religieuse dans Sweeney Agonistes de T. S. Eliot

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Abstract:

This paper evinces that T. S. Eliot's poem, Sweeney Agonistes, is stunningly misogynistic. Sexuality is represented as a lapse into animality and savagery. It is intertwined with murder, cannibalism, and animality. In the poem, the sensual triumphs over the spiritual side. Thus, the quest for religious salvation is to atone for the sin of sexuality. As the paper vindicates, separation from the feminine becomes a requirement for human and spiritual evolution. Of utmost significance, Sweeney's religious sensibility is the result of his disavowal of women.

Keywords:

Misogyny, Religious Awakening, Animality, T. S. Eliot, Sweeney Agonistes

Résumé:

Cet article démontre que le poème de T. S. Eliot, Sweeney Agonistes, est incroyablement misogyne. La sexualité est représentée comme une chute dans l'animalité et la sauvagerie. Il est étroitement lié au meurtre, au cannibalisme et à l'animalité. Dans le poème, le sensuel triomphe du côté spirituel. Ainsi, la quête du salut religieux consiste à expier le péché de la sexualité. Comme le souligne l'article, la séparation du féminin devient une exigence de l'évolution humaine et spirituelle. La sensibilité religieuse de Sweeney est de la plus haute importance le résultat de son désaveu à l'égard des femmes.

Mots clés:

Misogynie, éveil religieux, animalité, T. S. Eliot, Sweeney Agonistes

1. Introduction

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Though many of Eliot's critics discuss Eliot's "Sweeney Agonistes" as a play, we shall consider the work as a dramatic poem for manifold reasons. First, Eliot sweeps "Sweeney Agonistes" into "The Unfinished Poems". Second, the theme of this poem is confluent with that of the other Sweeney poems. Very much like in the saint poems, in "Sweeney Agonistes", there is a conflict between spiritual yearning and erotic desire. Third, fusing poetry and drama was one of the aims of T. S. Eliot. In 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry', one speaker attacks prose drama for its inability to get beyond the superficial, unlike verse, which emphasized the "permanent and universal."(Eliot, 1986, p.46) This mixing of poetry and drama is an attempt to make it universal. The poem, which is subtitled "Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama".is comprised of two parts: "Fragment of a Prologue" and "Fragment of an Agon". The two fragments of the poem were written between 1923 and 1924, and they were published in 1926 and 1927. This poem is replete with misogyny, which is evinced in associating sexuality with animality, primitivism, murder, and spiritual death. As the paper evinces, Sweeney associates erotic life with sin and guilt; hence, redemption is to be sought through religion and spiritual salvation which requires the sacrifice of the physical/sexual side.

2. Misogyny in Sweeney Agonistes

The first part of the poem opens with an empty conversation between two prostitutes, Doris and Dusty. The poverty of these women raises the question of gender and the economic equality between the sexes. In her discussion of the motive, which might push a woman to prostitution, De Beauvoir explains that "in a world where misery and unemployment prevail [...] there will be policemen and prostitutes"(De Beauvoir,1959,p.530). Women, in the poem, are driven to body-merchandising in order to survive and thrive. Doris does not like Pereira, because his payment of the rent is for exchange of sex. She becomes bored with the routine mechanical and stale erotic relationship with the whoremonger, who enslaved and exploited her. Her name is ironic because, in antiquity, Doris is the name of a nymph or pastoral lady. While they were talking, Pereira, the aggressive suitor, calls Doris on the phone, but she did not pick up the receiver. She asks Dusty to tell him that she has a "terrible chill"(Eliot, 1963, p.124). Her feigning physical illness is to deny his bid or request of sexual fulfillment. Their hatred of Pereira does not mean that they have moral principles to evaluate men. The two women prefer Sam just because he makes them laugh. Doris comments: "He is a funny fellow/He's like a fellow once I knew/He could make you laugh"(Eliot, 1963, p.123). Doris's and Dusty's life is exclusively concerned with making sex and fun. They are means of procuring pleasure for men. In fact, the flat where they live is a brothel.

Dusty and Doris started read fortune telling cards to pass time. They are reminiscent of the clairvoyante' Madame Sosostriis in "The Waste Land". They live in a world where religion is replaced by superstition. The scene of playing cards can be read as a bitter diatribe against women since in the patriarchal tradition, women are portrayed as witches, fortune tellers, and superstitious. Doris and Dusty spend their daily life waiting for their clients to foretell their future in order to be paid. Their job of fortune telling is not just to get money but also to have a sense of individuality. According to De Beauvoir, the "prostitute who wishes to acquire individual value does not limit herself to passive show of flesh; she strives to offer special talents"(1959, p.539). Doris associates the first card, which represents the king of the clubs, with the crudely violent Pereira. The critic De Villiers suggests that this card is "emblematic of violence and brute, primitive force."(2012, p.23).

Doris reflects that the card might represent Sweeney as well; this is because the latter is the cohort of Pereira, the human-animal. Both of them are sexual engines. In the poem, there is a remarkable confusion between people. And as they speak, they repeat each other's words as if they are parrots or identityless.

The second card, for Doris, represents "the four diamonds", which means a "small sum of money, or a present/Of Wearing apparel, or a party"(Eliot, 1963, p.125). This reading of the card reveals Doris's inner dream of material pleasure, especially that she inhabits a world where qualities are replaced by quantities. She is certainly paid for her sordid affair with men. De Beauvoir states that in "the money or other benefits she [the prostitute] gains from man, woman may find a compensation for her feminine inferiority complex; the money has a purifying role" (1959, p.541). The fifth card shows "The Queen of hearts"(Eliot, 1963, p.125) whom they identify with Mrs. Porter. In "The Waste Land", Mrs. Porter is a prostitute who has a sordid affair with Sweeney. The 'queen of hearts', as they guess, might be Doris or Dusty. The fact that they "are all hearts"(Eliot, 1963, p.125) means that they are prostitutes like Mrs. Porter. The sixth card, as Dusty interprets it, represents a "A quarrel. An estrangement. Separation of friends"(1963, p.125). This card reveals the relationship between man and woman in the modern age, which is marked by gender conflicts, alienation, and solitariness. It also foreshadows the conflict between Doris and Sweeney in the second part of the poem. For Dusty, the card of the "two spades"(1963, p.126) represents the coffin which predicts death. This is reinforced by the name Dusty, which evokes "Dust to Dust" in the Book of Common Prayer. The two spades suggest a violent act of murder, and Doris is afraid that this card is hers, because she "dreamt of weddings all last night"(1963, p.126). What also makes her sure that it is hers is that they were preparing for a party. According to Doris, the card that shows the "knave of spades"(1963, p.126), represents Snow. But for Dusty, it may also be Swart. Whoever the card represents, it indicates that the coming death, suggested by the coffin, will be carried out by one of the brutal and dishonest men who frequent Doris's flat. Like in the other Sweeney poems, in "Sweeney Agonistes", sex is associated with savagery and animality. Arrowsmith contends that "[a]most without exception the imagery of sex is animal, often murderous."(1977, p.24).

The two women's reading of fortune cards is interrupted by the arrival of Sam and his friends, including Captain Horsfall and two Jewish American businessmen, who were soldiers in the war: Klipstein and Krumpacker. They have come to seek pleasure in the orgiastic party, which is organized by Dusty and Doris. These men possess a carnivorous excessive sexual desire, which vitiates the solid barrier between men and animals.

Sweeney's pent up misogyny is overtly expressed in the dramatic exchange in which he and Doris, respectively, play the roles of the cannibal and the missionary. Sweeney, who fantasises about consuming and swallowing Doris, says: "I'll gobble you up. I'll be the cannibal"(Eliot, 1963, p.130). Sweeney imagines himself as a cannibal, because cannibals have an extravagant appetite. The jungle and Sweeney's world are linked by the rule of cannibalization, which blurs the boundaries between species and makes the human and the animal merge. Like in the other Sweeney poems, sexuality, here, is equated with violence and cannibalism. When Doris asks if he shall take her to a cannibal isle, Sweeney asserts: "I'll be the cannibal"(p.130). In an attempt to allay and appease the fear of cannibalism, Doris says to Sweeney that she "will be the missionary"(p.130). But Sweeney, as if in a battle to win the conflict, threatens to convert her into a stew, which means a dish of vegetables and meat to be eaten. He says: "Yes I'd eat you!/In a nice little, white little,

soft little, tender little,/juicy little-right little, missionary stew”(p.130). Sweeney’s words vindicate that his misogyny is infused with the masculine pleasures of consumption and sex. In fact, Sweeney’s description of the act of cannibalization is not just erotic. It also entails the objectification of Doris. Bataille posits that cannibalizing someone means making him/her “a thing-a roast, a stew.”(1989, p.40). Doris, who is metaphorically cannibalized, is turned into a piece of meat. Sweeney’s thinking of cannibalization is also meant to show his power, domination, and his desire to erase the Other’s existence. His wish to take Doris to a cannibal isle reveals his intention to expel her from culture and the human community to a primitive life. The female, in the patriarchal tradition, is always associated with nature. She is the combination of the jungle and the urban. In De Beauvoir’s view, the “woman is related to *nature*, she incarnates it: vale of blood, open rose, siren, the curve of a hill”(1959, p.256). Sweeney’s threatening to take Doris to a cannibal isle and to eat her expresses his fantastical desire of expelling the feminine and taking her back to her origin.

Interestingly, death, in Eliot’s poems, is always present in moments of encounter between man and woman. In this poem, Sweeney and Doris are joined into oneness not by love but by consuming and cannibalizing her. In other words, sexual desire is cannibalized. Eliot always vilifies the image of romantic union between lovers. In “Sweeney Erect”, for instance, he joins the odd pair Naucicaa and Polyphemus. Likewise, in this poem, he allies the cannibal Sweeney with the missionary Doris. He also allies the dead girl with the live man in Sweeney’s tale of the murdered girl.

Doris’s house looks like a colonized territory, especially that men who come to the party were soldiers in the war. Brooker, who stresses the interrelatedness of violence and the First World War, posits that violence and desire, in the Sweeney poems, “emerged largely from the convergence of two powerful elements in Eliot’s own life. The first, World War I, was public and impersonal; the other, the poet’s marriage in 1915 to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, was private and intensely personal (2002, p. 424). Despite its usefulness, Brooker’s view is narrow. The War might have only bolstered Eliot’s contempt for sexuality which he associates with violence. The existence of the two American men, in the party, suggests that sexuality is akin to colonization; in other words, it is a form of domination. These American men, who visit London for the first time, pose a real threat for Doris and Dusty, because they will plunge not only into the new country but also into the “dark continent”. Woman, in the patriarchal myth, is always considered a mystery. According to De Beauvoir, woman is “for man, [...] considered to be mysterious in essence”(1959, p.263). In a patriarchal culture, “Woman is an enigma and she poses enigmas”(De Beauvoir, p.241). The house itself, which is rented, indicates that women’s bodies are no longer a private property. Moreover, Sweeney’s tale of the murdered girl is like the colonial discourse of exploration.

3. Animality and the Absence of Religion

Characters live in a world where moral garments are stripped away. With the absence of ethical guidelines, in the modern world, the human relapses into the animal. Bradbury maintains that the “city was the storm-centre of civilization, it was the jungle awaiting the ministrations of the missionary; it was the place of cultural confusion and cultural hope.”(1971, p.49-50). Taking into account the fact that the poem is dramatic, the party looks like a zoo full of animals. Jungle imagery is reinforced by Sweeney’s cannibal isle which represents the society where they live. Sweeney’s

crocodile isle, which is far from civilization and modernization, is emblematic of his inclination to a primitive life. He says:

Well that's life on a crocodile isle/There is no telephones/There is no gramophones/There is no motor cars/No two-seaters, no six-seaters./No Citroen, no Rolls-Royce./Nothing to eat but the fruit as it grows/Nothing to see but the palm trees one way/And the sea the other way,/Nothing to hear but the sound of the surf/(Eliot, 1963, p.130).

The cannibal isle is a metaphor for wilderness, savagery, and estrangement.

Characters, in the poem, live outside the borders of humanity. The sensual side, which is absent in the emotionally drained Prufrock, is the sole dimension which defines the individual in Sweeney's world. In this poem, Sweeney seems to provide an answer to a meaty question about the nature of life that has been asked in "Portrait of a Lady." In this poem, the lady, trying to stir the young man's dormant desire, says: "You do not know what life is [...] you hold it in your hands."(Eliot, 1996, p.328). For Sweeney, life is a perpetual procreative urge. It is "Birth, and copulation, and death"(p.131). This life, which is directed solely by the storming emotions without any spiritual guidance, looks very much like life in a cannibal isle where the trinity of existence is "Birth, and copulation, and death." In "Sweeney Agonistes", characters' overdose of passion outweighs their spiritual side. Birth, copulation, and death, are all linked by the image of the bed in "Sweeney Erect." Indeed, these are the most primitive corporeal functions.

The chatter, in the party, turns into a song whose imagery indicates that members of the party are inhabitants of a cannibal isle. This song, by Wauchope and Horsfall, suggests sexual ravishment: "Tell me in what part of the wood/Do you want to flirt with me?/Under the breadfruit,/banyan, palm leaf/Or under the bamboo tree?/Any old tree will do for me/Any old wood is just as good/Any old isle is just my style/Any fresh egg Any fresh egg/And the sound of the coral sea"(Eliot, 1963, p.132). This song is abundant with sexual and primitive imagery. According to Galef, "[a]s Eliot must have known from his forays into English culture, the banyan, the palm, and bamboo symbolize spiritual qualities, as well as representing physical vigor."(1988, p.502). Since characters, in the poem, are spiritually bereft, the banyan, the palm, the bamboo, and the egg, are symbolic of fertility and sexuality. This is evident in the opening words of the song, which run as follows: "Under the bamboo/Bamboo Bamboo/Under the Bamboo tree/Two live as one/one live as two/Two live as three"(p.131). These words imply sexual reproduction. The first song is followed by another one which is also about erotic life in the isle. Klipstein and Krumpacker chant:

My little island girl/My little island girl/I'm going to stay with you/ And we won't worry what to do/We won't go home when it rains/ We'll gather hibiscus flowers/ For it won't be minutes but hours/ For it won't be hours but years(Eliot, 1963, p.133).

Indeed, women are sexual pawns in the hands of men. The two songs, in the poem, evince men's desire to stimulate and possess Doris. To borrow words from "The Waste Land", Doris and Dusty are visited by men, who have been demobbed, to spend "a good time." Their bodies are objects of pleasure for many subjects. The songs, in the poem, are taken from popular songs of the period. The song by Wauchope and Horsfall, for instance, is based on Bob Cole and J. Rosamund Johnson's popular song "Under the Bamboo Tree", which was composed in 1905. Eliot's infusion of popular culture, in this poem, is in stark contrast with his critical essays in which he calls for an

elitist literature to keep high culture apart from mass culture. In his attempt to explain Eliot's insertion of popular culture in the poem, Chnitz writes: "The popular elements of Sweeney Agonists are [...] implicated in the [poem's] nihilistic vision of modern life. Eliot uses jazz and other forms of popular culture only to expose them as vacuous-as symptoms, in other words, of modernity's spiritual and culture emptiness." (1995, p.243). Eliot's use of popular culture reflects the low life of Sweeney's world, which is characterized by vulgarity and spiritual bankruptcy.

4. Misogyny and Homoeroticism

Misogyny, in "Sweeney Agonistes", is manifested in sexual violence against women. Doris and Dusty are victims of sexpots, who have come to quench their avaricious desire. They become rivals in this affair. Girard postulates that "the subject desires the object because the rival desires it. In desiring an object the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires" (2013, p. 163). In the poem, there are many suggestions of the interrelatedness of violence and male friendship. Sweeney, for instance, avows, in his tale of murder, that he stroke up a relationship with the male murderer. He says: "He used to come and see me sometimes/I'd give him a drink and cheer him up" (p.135). Likewise, men, who attend the party, were friends during the First World War. Fraternity, during the war, was often homoerotic. Surprisingly, Eliot's critics have not noticed the erotic triangle in the poem. In the erotic triangle, there are usually two-or more-rivals who are men and a woman who is the object of desire. Sedgwick, who was attracted to René Girard's idea of rivalry, maintains that "in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links the either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love', differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent." (1985, p.21). So, Doris, in the poem, is a conduit of homosocial/homosexual desire in the sense that she helps bring men together. The love between these male rivals is as strong as their desire for the woman, who is used as a means to strengthen bonds between men.

In the poem, there are many instances of the erotic triangle. Klipstein and Krumpacker's rivalry is evident in their conversation with Doris in which they repeat almost the same ideas with slight differences. Their strong bond of intimacy is revealed in their comment on London. Klipstein describes London as "a little too gay for us/ Yes I'll say a little too gay" (p.129). Krumpacker answers: "Yes London's a little too gay for us", but he denies that he means "anything *coarse*" (p.129). The erotic triangle is clear in the love song to Doris, which is sung by the male friends Wauchope and Horsfall. It is also evident in the song of the little island girl by the intimate male friends Klipstein and Krumpacker. The setting of the two songs is an island which is similar to Sweeney's cannibal isle. The erotic triangle is also suggested by the exchange between Snow and Swarts about the tale of the murdered girl. This erotic triangle also appears in the first part of the poem where Doris confuses between Sweeney and Pereira and between Snow and Swarts. This erotic triangle is meant to cement the bond between men and to perpetuate the patriarchal system. According to Sedgwick, the "definition of patriarchy in terms of "relationships between men" [...] in making the power relationships between men and women appear to be dependent on the power relationships between men and men, suggests that large-scale social structures are congruent with the male-male female erotic triangles" (Sedgwick, 1985, p.25).

5. Misogyny and Murder

Sweeney interrupts the chatter in the party, which is supposed to establish a romantic atmosphere, by his tale of the man who has murdered a girl and put her in a Lysol bath. Doris begs Sweeney not to tell the story, because her card represents the coffin. She says: "Oh! Mr. Sweeney, please don't talk, / I cut the cards before you came / And I drew the coffin" (p.133). This act of brute violence, in Sweeney's tale, is the epitome of man's vituperous hatred of the feminine. Listening to the story, attentively, Doris becomes afraid she will meet the lot of the violated girl. She magnifies the experience of the murdered girl to embrace all women who are also subject to violence. She says: "A woman runs a terrible risk" (p.134). The tale is an indirect way of informing Doris about the never ending cycle of violence against women. It hints at Sweeney's desire to murder her. This sacrificial feast is predicted in Doris's cards, which represent a coffin, two spades, and a knave. The use of ritual, in the dramatic poem, emphasizes the idea of mimetic desire. Daniel defines "ritual drama [as] a dramatic text whose conventions place it closer to the ritual end of the mimetic-ritual scale." (2011, p.440). Murder of the girl is an act of mimetic desire. The tale gives the impression that the party is organized for the ritual sacrifice of Doris. Eliot uses ritual in "Sweeney Agonistes", because the "function of ritual is to "purify" violence; that is, to "trick" violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals" (Girard, 2013, p. 39). Ritual sacrifice is used as an alibi to justify and sanctify violence. It is not condemned like the original act of violence. In this respect, Girard states: "The original act of violence is unique and spontaneous. Ritual sacrifices, however, are multiple, endlessly repeated" (2013, p. 114). Girard draws attention to the "essentially mimetic character of sacrifice with regard to the original, generative act of violence" (2013, p. 115). As Sweeney continues narrating his story, Doris wants to stop the demands of the ritual, which will end in murder. She wants to save her life by asking him to stop. Snow, who shows an abiding interest in the tale, responds that they are curious to know the story. He says: "I assure you, Sir, we are very interested" (p.134). Sweeney, who resumes his story, despite Doris's resentments, spells out the starkest statement of misogyny in all of Eliot's poems. He says: "Any man has to, needs to, wants to / Once in a lifetime, do a girl in" (p.134). This malignant misogyny strikes a chord with a statement by the misogynist poet Baudelaire who writes: "We should kill them since we cannot comprehend them." (Baudelaire, as Cited in De Beauvoir 1956, p.267). This sadistic compulsion to murder a woman pours out a heart filled with women's hatred. Girard maintains that

Men can dispose of their violence more efficiently if they regard the process not as something emanating from within themselves, but as a necessity imposed from without, a divine decree whose least infraction calls down terrible punishment. When they banish sacrificial practices from the "real", everyday world, modern theorists continue to misrepresent the violence of sacrifice (2013, p. 14).

Murder of the female is a necessity in order to release man's repressed violence. So, sacrifice is a ritual, which is meant to gratify the act of murder without trespassing social conventions. Girard posits that the "sacrificial process furnishes an outlet for those violent impulses that cannot be mastered by self-restraint; a partial outlet, to be sure, but always renewable" (2013, p. 18). When Swarts interrupts the story remarking that "[t]hese fellows always get pinched in the end" (134), Snow rejoices that "they don't all get pinched in the end" (p.134). He supports his view by giving the example of the Epson Heath, a crime murder, which he read about in daily newspapers.

Sweeney contends that the murderer, in the story, “didn’t get pinched in the end.”(p.134) Sweeney’s tale of murder is extremely interesting for Swartz and Snow, because they were fascinated by the fact that the man was not caught and punished. This fact attests to man’s triumph, mastery and superiority. After the murder, according to Sweeney, the murderer continues taking in milk, and he pays the rent, which makes the reader associate him with the rent- payer Pereira.

Sweeney’s story of the girl, who was killed and put in an acid bath to disintegrate, is reminiscent of the mythic figure Agamemnon, who is killed by his wife in a bath. Indeed, Sweeney conjoins sex and death through his story of the man who “did a girl in” and through his intention to take Doris to a cannibal isle. The killer, in Sweeney’s story, is a lust-driven monster, because after the murder, he lived with the corpse for months. This sadistic and necrophiliac act is reminiscent of the saint, in “The Love Song of St. Sebastian”, who kills the woman he loves, then he delights in seeing her curled ears after her demise. Sweeney’s erotic misogyny and his desire to “do a girl in” recalls to mind Wilde’s famous poem “The Ballad of Reading Goal” in which the male speaker says: “Yet each man kills the thing he loves/By each let this be heard.”(1898)..

Darts of cruelty to women are also suggested by the first epigraph which alludes to *The Libation Bearers*. In this play, Orestes was encumbered by the onerous duty of killing his own mother to avenge her grave crime of killing his own father. In the play, Clytemnestra is represented as a conflation between human and beast. The first epigraph does not just evince violence enacted against women, but also man’s destitution of the most natural human emotions, which is mother love. In his commentary on the epigraph, Murphy suggests the following interpretation: “[W]hile Orestes had neither a romantic nor an erotic attachment to Clytemnestra, his undoing was clearly the result of his challenging the awesome emotional and psychological power that a human mother maintains over her offspring”(2007, p. 383). Orestes’s matricide is an evasion of the powerful mental and psychological hold Clytemnestra might exert over him as a mother. Orestes wants to eradicate maternal love which drives a man to his mother, for the simple reason that she is a woman. In *The Libation Bearers*, the struggle between the sexes is also revealed in the stance of the sexes vis-a-vis the murder of Orestes’s mother. While god Appollo commands Orestes to kill his mother, the Furies who are females, torment Orestes psychologically after the murder.

In his prose, Eliot evinces his interest in murder and sex crimes which are reported in daily newspapers. His essay on the Elizabethan dramatist Seneca reveals that he is a reader of *News of the World* which reports crimes of murder and sex. In this essay, Eliot writes: “But for Seneca, we might have had more plays in *The Yorkshire Traged* mould; that is to say, the equivalent of the *news of the world* murder report.”(1956, p.22). This play is “based on contemporary or recent crimes committed in England” (“Seneca” 24). In *The Yorkshire Tragedy*, the husband “kills his two young sons, throws the servant downstairs and breaks her neck, and nearly succeeds in killing his wife. In *Arden of Feversham* the wife and her conspirators stab the husband to death” (Eliot, 1956, p.25). Seneca’s tragedy was inspired by a crime which was committed in 1605. What interests Eliot, in this play, is the man’s stabbing of his wife. He finds it replete with misogyny and violence against women.

In the same vein, Sweeney’s tale, which combines sex and murder, brings to mind Eliot’s short story “Eeldrop and Appleplex”, which includes a story of a man who “murders his mistress. The important fact is that for the man the act is eternal”(Eliot, 2013). “Eeldrop and Appleplex”, who represent Eliot and Ezra Pound respectively, rented rooms in an immoral and evil neighborhood in order to understand the nature and behavior of these disreputable people. The two

friends interview people about criminals and they jot down their observations and views in notebooks. After that, they often have moral and philosophical discussions about the events.

Eliot finds in detective fiction and popular press tales of murder which echo and reinforce his misogynous views. The Daily Mail, for instance, in the twenties, was very popular because of its reporting of crimes, mainly sex crimes. Eliot was a voracious reader of the Daily Mail as he avows to its Editor in a letter dated 8 January 1923. He writes: "It is so remarkable to find oneself in agreement with the policy of any newspaper on more than one point that I am writing to express my cordial approval of your attitude on nearly every public question of present importance." (Eliot, 2011, p.7). In this letter to the Daily Mail's Editor, Eliot expresses his interest in the Mail's reporting of sex crimes. He makes a particular reference to Ilford murder, which is given a detailed coverage. According to the newspaper, while he was returning from the theatre, a man was killed near his house by his wife Edith Jessie Thompson and her lover Frederick Bywaters. The two accused lovers were sentenced to death. Newspapers, which wrote profusely about the event, described Edith Jessie Thompson as "the Madame Bovary of North-East London and the Messalina of Ilford." (Eliot, 2011, p.7). The Daily Mail supports the court for ignoring the calls for mercy from the part of people and the liberal press. In his letter to the Daily Mail Editor, Eliot expresses his vehement view of the liberal opinion. He says: "On the Ilford Murder your attitude has been in striking contrast with the flaccid sentimentality of other papers I have seen, which have been so impudent as to affirm that they represented the great majority of the British people" (Eliot, 2011, p. 7). So, Eliot regards liberalism as a sort of feminine sentimentalism. In his commentary on Ilford Murder trial, a prominent figure in the Daily Mail, writes:

There are women who hate their husbands and continue to live with them. Some of these are murderesses at heart if not in actuality. They long for their husbands to die, even though all the time they may be living as smiling and complacent wives. The ways of the wicked woman are hard to understand. It may be that when she is more than usually demonstrative in her affection that is the time she hates you most (Cooper, 2011, p.84).

This bitter and vehement depiction of women was always remarkable in the Daily Mail. In this newspaper, women "seem to have been seen primarily as consumers of clothes, cosmetics, decorative furnishings, pulp romances, and pictures. Oddly enough, the Mail's general attitude towards the 'modern' woman in the editorial page was usually scornful, when it wasn't openly misogynist" (Cooper, 2011, p.23).

In the early years of the twenties, News of the World also wrote about crimes in Britain. Jayne states that the "general impression which the *news* gives of life in the period of *Wonna Go Home, Baby?* is that all human activity is based on three fundamental appetites: the desires for music, drink, and sex." (1985, p.104). In fact, these appetites, which are predominant in the first half of the 20th century, and mainly in the jazz age, are very remarkable in "Sweeney Agonistes". Sweeney's tale of murder, in particular, imports impressions of reading a sex crime in a popular newspaper.

6. Divine Love Vs. Carnal Desire

The fact that Sweeney is swinging between divine love and carnal love makes the poem highly equivocal. Sweeney's world is a lifeless waste land without any spiritual vision. At the

beginning of the poem, he is totally alienated from God, and he is reluctant to seek for a spiritual rebirth. He says: "I've been born, and once is enough./You don't remember, but I remember./Once is enough"(p.131). The line also suggests his hatred of the feminine, because birth reminds him of the terrible fact that he was born of a woman. According to De Beauvoir, to "remind him [man] thus that his mother is a carnal being is to remind him of his own birth, an event that he repudiates with all his strength or at least wants to give the dignity of a grand cosmic phenomenon"(1959, p.209-10). Sweeney has used the cannibal isle as a symbol of lust as death. His saying, by the end of the story, "talk to live men about what they do"(p.134), suggests that not only the killer of the girl, but Sweeney is spiritually dead as well.

Doris does not like the kind of life Sweeney proposes on the island. She says: "That's not life, that's no life/Why I'd just as soon be dead"(p.133). Sweeney replies: "That's what life is "(p.133). For him, "Life is death"(p.133). The kind of life Doris and her cohort Dusty live is a kind of spiritual death or death-in-life. Sweeney's conversation with Doris implies that man-woman relationships, which are restricted to sexuality, generate nothing but spiritual death. Doris's and Dusty's life, in a rented house, suggests the absence of a spiritual home. The original title of the poem, "Wonna go Home, Baby?" also evokes psychological deprivation and homelessness, which are reinforced by the image of the cannibal isle. Sweeney's cannibal isle is symbolic of spiritual sterility. It is used by Sweeney to awaken Doris to the reality that she is living a dark savage life and to prompt her to imagine another kind of life. He wants to lead her to the discovery of the meaning of the spiritual life. However, Doris and Dusty do not grasp the idea Sweeney wants to transmit. In response, he says: "I gotta use words when I talk to you"(p.135). The line, which stings like an insult, implies that women are spiritually blind. It also suggests that spiritual experiences are very difficult to communicate.

In an attempt to explain the meaning of spiritual death, Sweeney gives the example of the man whose crime of murder results in the collapse of the existential borders between life and death. The murderer does not know who is alive and who is dead, because like the girl, who is physically dead, he feels spiritually dead. For Eliot, someone who kills a woman, "for the brief space he has to live, he is already dead. He is already in a different world from ours. He has crossed the frontier"(Eliot, 2013). The killer in Sweeney's tale, also, becomes unable to draw boundaries between life and death: "He didn't know if the girl was alive/and he was dead/He didn't know if they were both alive/or both were dead"(p.135). The lines are reminiscent of Eliot's poem "Elegy" in which murder is a very important subject. The poem makes allusions to Aminor and Aspatia in *The Maid's Tragedy* and the brother and sister in Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher". In both works, sexuality is coterminous with murder.

7. Spiritual Awakening

Very much like the male speaker in "Elegy", Sweeney becomes consumed with guilt which is conveyed in the following chorus: "When you're alone in the middle of the night and/you wake in a sweat and a hell of a fright/ When you're alone in the middle of the bed and/you wake like someone hit you in the head/You've had a cream of a nightmare dream and/You've got the hoo-ha's coming to you"(p.136). His awareness of his sins evinces the beginning of his spiritual awakening. In his essay, Baudelaire, Eliot states that the "recognition of the reality of sin is a New Life"(1986, p. 427). Sweeney, whose sensual appetite is akin to murder, becomes sin-laden and haunted by the idea of death. The poem ends with a line which makes "The Waste Land" leap to

mind: “you wait for a knock and the turning of a lock for you know the hangman’s waiting for you”(p.136). The knock, which brings to mind “A Game of Chess”, is symbolic of death which is attractive to all Christian mystics.

In his essay, “Cyril Tourneur”, Eliot made a comment on the death motive in Tourneur’s *Revenger’s Tragedy*. He states that “the hatred of life is an important phase-even, if you like, a mystical experience-in life itself.”(1986, p.190). Eliot views Cyril Tourneur’s hatred of life, which is in sharp contrast with the Romantics’ relentless optimism and their ideal vision of reality, as a very important step to reach mystical experience. Sweeney’s feelings of nihilism and despair are also emblematic of the beginning of his mystical quest. In his discussion of Pascal’s mysticism, Eliot, in his essay *The Pensées of Pascal*, states: “His despair, his disillusion, are, however, no illustration of personal weakness; they are perfectly objective, because they are essential moments in the progress of the intellectual soul; and for the type of Pascal they are the analogue of the drought, the dark night, which is an essential stage in the progress of the Christian mystic”(1986, p.412). The dark night, which Pascal experiences, is similar to St. John of the Cross’s dark night of the soul. Sweeney’s hopelessness and disillusionment, at the end of the poem, evinces the savage spears of guilt and his desire to atone for his sins. His experience of the dark night, at the end of the poem is, according to mystics, like St. John of the Cross, a very important stage for the upward journey of the soul.

Sweeney is tormented by an ineffable sense of guilt, like Orestes who suffers the pangs of conscience for murdering his own mother. After the murder, which was commanded by Apollo, Orestes saw three enraged furies which represent the knocks of conscience. The furies deprived Orestes of rest, because he committed the sin of a kindred murder; he violates the family ties by murdering his own mother. In the first epigraph to “Sweeney Agonistes”, Orestes, addressing the Chorus, says: “You don’t see them, you don’t-but I see them: they are hunting me down. I must move on”(p.122). Orestes conveys Sweeney’s realization of the horror of living in darkness, far from the spiritual light. The vengeful furies, who pursued Orestes, resemble the Christian notion of guilt and atonement.

Like the murderer in his tale, Sweeney, the sex criminal, becomes cognizant of his sins, and he feels the void of life without the spiritual side. His feeling of being pursued by the hoo’ha signals the beginning of his purgation. According to Smith, the “hoo-has serve the same function as the furies in their pursuit of Orestes.”(1985, p.98). The hoo-has, which deprive Sweeney from sleep, represent the pangs of conscience, very much like the Furies in *The Libation Bearers*. Du Plessis views the hoo-has as, a combination of guilt, fear, and horror (1995, p.683). Sweeney’s suffering by being pursued by the hoo’ha is likely to expiate his guilt and lead to his salvation. His self-torture resembles the saints’ masochism, which aims at attaining mystical vision. The knocks upon the door are symbolic of the pangs of conscience, very much like in William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. The chorus says: “And you wait for a knock and the turning of a lock/for you know the hangman’s waiting for you”(p.136). Indeed, Sweeney’s awakening to the reality of his sins augurs his spiritual quest. As he becomes infused with religious insights, Sweeney wants to escape from his deadening life and to take refuge in an isle. He realizes that the physical and the sensual life are but “Birth, copulation, and death.”

In comparison with the previous Sweeney poems, in “Sweeney Agonistes”, there is a remarkable progress in terms of evolution. In this poem, for instance, Sweeney speaks, and this indicates his ascent to humanity. He is climbing the ladder of evolution, since in “Sweeney Erect”

and “Sweeney Among the Nightingales”, he was only aware and obsessed with his biological needs. In “Sweeney Agonistes”, Sweeney becomes conscious and tormented by the reality of his sinful and lustful nature. Girard states that it “has long been assumed that a decisive difference between primitive and civilized man is the former’s general inability to identify the guilty party and to adhere to the principle of guilt”(2013, p. 24). Sweeney is stirred into a spiritual awakening. Like the killer, in his tale, he feels that he is a hypocrite, tormented by the toils of remorse. This feeling is very important since, as Eliot points out, it is “in moments of moral and spiritual struggle [...] that men and women come nearest to being real ”(Eliot, 1933, p. 52). Eliot was very obsessed with the idea of the Original Sin. This burden had encumbered him all his life. Chiari assumes that “Eliot was a sin- haunted Christian, deeply concerned with the suffering of others”(1982, p.52). Religion, for Sweeney, is the only way to rid himself of the burden of guilt. So, he starts his quest for spiritual purgation. He also wants to lead members of the party to an expiration of the sin of sensuality.

The critic Buttram also remarks Sweeney’s moral development. He states: “While Sweeney is by no means devoted to contemplation of divine union, the first stages of moral terror have resulted in his dissociation from other humans. His recognition of pervasive nothingness is another promising sign. Inadvertently, he has entered a condition the spiritual ramifications of which exceed his own awareness”(2009, p.181). The hope of spiritual regeneration is evident in the egg, which is a traditional symbol of rebirth. It is also suggested by the trinity, which is conveyed in the characters’ song, “Two live as one/One lives as two/Two live as three (p.131).The cannibal isle is considered by Sweeney as a refuge from the unholy city and its hedonism. In Crawford’s view, “[s]alvation is to be sought in a return to the jungle. It is the tom-tom that convinces the reader that the young man is potentially at least, capable of being saved from the genteel hell in which he is immured”(1987, p.77). What fosters the death of the spirit, in the modern city, is the development of industrialization. Thus, Sweeney seems to be inclined to the traditional simple life. In his cannibal isle, “[t]here is no telephones/There is no gramophones/There is no motor cars/No two-seaters, no six seaters/ [...] Nothing to eat but the fruit as it grows./Nothing to see but the palmtree one way/And the sea the other way,/ Nothing to hear but the sound of the surf”(130-31). In his essay, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot complains that industrialism has resulted in a split of identity into the dichotomy soul/body. In his words, “the tendency of unlimited industrialism is to create bodies of men and women-of all classes-detached from tradition, alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion: in other words, a mob. And a mob is no less a mob if it is well fed, well clothed, well housed, and well disciplined.”(1979, p.17). Modern industrialization renders subjects into objects, which are impoverished of the spiritual and the intellectual dimensions. According to Eliot,

the cause of that disease, which destroys the very soil in which culture has its roots, is [...] the relentless pressure of modern industrialism, setting the problems which the extreme ideas attempt to solve. Not least of the effects of industrialism is that we become mechanical in mind, and consequently attempt to provide solutions in terms of *engineering*, for problems which are essentially problems of *life* (1945, p.338).

Eliot spells out his vehement criticism of industrialism because it resulted in an unrestrained freedom and an utter decline of morality. It has left pernicious effects on tradition, morals and

ethics. So, Eliot's call for a return to tradition is strident. His view is that man, who has a primitive nature, needs to be civilized by religion. That is, to be civilized means to be Christianized.

8. The Woman as an Impediment to the Religious Quest

Since women distract man from the spiritual path, perfection of the soul necessitates physical isolation from others. Sweeney opts for a life of solitariness, and he shuts women and all amusements from his life. This dispensing of all enjoyments of life in search for the Absolute echoes Eliot's early mystical sensibility. In a letter to Geoffrey Faber, dated 18 September 1927, Eliot wrote:

There is another good thing of life [...] which I have only had in flashes. It is the sudden realization of being separated from all enjoyment, from all things of this earth, even from Hope; a sudden separation and isolation from everything; and at that moment of illumination, a recognition of the fact that one can do without all these things, a joyful recognition of what John of the Cross means when he says that the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the craving for all created beings (Eliot, 2012, p.712-713)

Sweeney's emotional detachment is probably an attempt to atone for his deep-seated sexual desire, which he considers very sinful.

Woman, for Sweeney, is the arch-enemy who precludes religious quest. She illustrates the concept of the scapegoat propounded by René Girard. The scapegoat is the person on whom the sins of the community are conferred. Hence, he is subject to collective persecution. In his account of the scapegoat, Girard states that "sometimes the persecutors choose their victims because they belong to a class that is particularly susceptible to persecution rather than because of the crimes they have committed" (1986, p.17). In accordance with this criterion, the scapegoat is a person who is marginalized like the Jews, ethnic religious minorities, women, children, and old people. Though the crimes and disasters that are attributed to the scapegoat are groundless, the latter are scapegoated. In the ancient times, the Greeks used to select and slaughter a scapegoat as a ritual. The myth of woman as sinner can be traced back to ancient Greece. Girard maintains that the "definition of victim as sinner or criminal is so absolute in myth" (1986, p.36).

The intention to murder Doris might be read as an attempt to transcend the flesh and abandon the feminine who impedes spiritual commitment. For Christians, woman "is the source of sin, and through her man lost Eden" (De Beauvoir, 1959, p. 234). So, the original sin might be rectified by abandoning women. Sex, according to patriarchal culture, is used "to designate woman; she is the flesh, its delights and dangers" (De Beauvoir, 1959, p. 161). Religious quest requires the killing and effacement of all human affection. The second epigraph of the poem is taken from St. John of the Cross who states: "The soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the love of created beings" (p.122). The epigraph means that one should distance himself from all attachments if he wants to achieve spiritual fulfillment. In other words, religious yearning requires isolation and apartness from others. In an attempt to explain the second epigraph of the poem, Eliot writes: "To kill human affections would make one 'rather more a completely living corpse than most people are' [...] human affections [...] cannot lead to the love of God, but the love of God is capable of elevating our affections, which otherwise would be little different from those of animals" (Eliot, as Cited in Pinion, 1986, p.94). Though it is a violent act, separating oneself from a woman by murdering her is attributed to a higher cause which is the love of God. This act is a

prelude to spiritual life. According to Girard, who evinces the close relationship between violence and the sacred, “[r]eligion shelters us from violence just as violence seeks shelter in religion”(2013, p. 26). Girard adds that “the primitive people themselves recognize this violence only in an almost entirely dehumanized form; that is, under the deceptive guise of the sacred”(2013, p.32). Sweeney wants to kill the object of passion and desire to attain something greater, which is the love of God.

Spiritual purification necessitates man’s detachment from romantic relations and his deflection from the sensual world, which is nothing but “Birth, and copulation, and death.” To be Christian requires the elevation of the soul over the body and its sensual allures. De Beauvoir maintains that:

It is Christianity which invests woman anew with frightening prestige: fear of the other sex is one of the forms assumed by the anguish of man’s uneasy conscience. The Christian is divided within himself; the separation of body and soul, of life and spirit, is complete; original sin makes of the body the enemy of the soul: all ties of the flesh seem evil”(1959, p.184).

Like in the saint poems, in “Sweeney Agonistes”, there is a conflict between eroticism and mysticism. Smith contends that in this poem, Eliot expresses “both the agony of the saint and the private anguish and rage of the man trapped in a world of demanding relationships with women”(1985, p.98). In this fierce conflict between mysticism and eroticism, the only way to get rid of a woman definitively is to kill her. In *The Family Reunion*, Harry possesses a similar desire to kill his wife. “Sweeney Agonistes” is interwoven with the saint poems’ theme of destroying the physical to reach the Absolute. Spiritual life requires the individual’s sacrifice of divesting himself of the love of women as the poem’s second epigraph indicates. Eliot, who had a religious sensibility before his conversion, believes, like Christians, that woman is a deterrent force from the spiritual life. His views, in fact, are partly rooted in his puritan origins. Galef opines that

Eliot’s “distrust of women in general, reflecting Eliot’s own views at this time, may be in part temperamental, but it would seem also to have a doctrinal base. For the practicing Christian, women are allurements from the true path of faith [...] Isolation from others hardly condones a murder, however, as Sweeney commits in one projected scene of the play”(1988, p.502).

Christians have an aversion to the feminine body. They abhor the flesh, because they associate it with women. De Beauvoir states that “[e]vil is an absolute reality; and the flesh is sin. And of course, since woman remains always the Other, it is not held that reciprocally male and female are both flesh: the flesh that is for the Christian the hostile *Other* is precisely woman”(1959, p.184). The critic Bordo, who analyses the mentality of men in a patriarchal society, opines that man’s inclination to subjects like religion is an alibi to escape women and subjectivity. In her words, men “are not supposed to be slaves to sexual moods and needs, to physical and emotional dependency. They are supposed to think objectively-to think like Man with a capital letter, discerners of the Eternal Truth, the universal subject of history, philosophy, religion”(Bordo, 1999, p.19). So, Eliot’s religious sensibility might be interpreted in this regard.

9. Conclusion

Sweeney Agonistes is misogynistic in its scornful depiction of women and man-woman relationships. It represents heterosexuality as a matter of illicit relationships and stultifying sentimentalism. In this poem, sex is always associated with murder and cannibalism. It dissolves species boundaries and poses a real threat to being human. In this poem, characters are identified with animals because of their primitive instincts and their raw sexual drives. Their sexual animal appetite, which gives a biological conception of human nature, makes them sink into savagery. Characters tear themselves loose from religion and moral values. Hence, the sensual triumphs over the spiritual. Physicality and the flesh preclude the individual's full humanity. They are barriers that must be crossed in order to be civilized. In "Sweeney Agonistes", the ascent of the soul is at the cost of the elimination of the body. Eliot believes that man is originally a savage, who needs to be civilized by religion and tradition. "Sweeney Agonistes", in particular, suggests the need for a struggle to atone for the sin of sexuality.

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