

T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney Erect* Revisited

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Abstract

The main goal in writing this paper is to illustrate and shed light on the four main themes of the poem; myth and misogyny, violence and sexuality, self-importance and carelessness, human desire and animality in the poem and how Eliot describes his own preview on modern man and the condition of life which is full incompleteness by presenting this poem. Reading the poem carefully will make that clear that Eliot chose those themes for some reasons; firstly because the modern society suffers from lack of communication and live in an imaginary life and most of them construct a relationship just to quench their whims, not to complete their lives. Eliot believed that modern man is selfish and careless about the main points of building sabbatical life for themselves and others. In his paper, modern man's problem has been shown on the shape of duplicity, lack of relationship and the effect of poverty on women in society, these problems are depicted by Eliot in "Sweeney Erect". Moreover, the paper focuses on Eliot's portrayal of women in the poem and finally through these themes Eliot tells us "Sweeney Erect" is a mirror, in which the condition of modern society is reflected.

Key words: Sweeney; Women; Men; Love; Brutality; Sexuality; Disloyalty

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INTRODUCTION

Man is a social animal but he is reduced only to an animal nevertheless sometimes they act as an animal. Modern man alienated from God, society and family; also they alienated from self. Humans follow the principle of 'give' and 'take' without thinking about it, and they seek for opportunities not making it and making profits from others. People are distrustful. They live for themselves. This selfishness makes them be dried up day-by-day and they become selfless at the end of the path. Man suffers an impoverishment of emotional power to live. They have to live according to some decadent rules of their society and culture. Human's life is full of sordidness and sensuality with a number of tiresome problems. They should be aware of every progress and condition that changes their lives. Nevertheless, in Eliot's "Sweeney Erect" men are at the top of the ineffectuality and losing man's spirit. In the poem, man faced several psychological and spiritual problems in different conditions. These problems could be seen in three ways. Each of them determines a series of subsidiary relating problems which would make the whole entity. The duplicity of man, lack of the relationship between men and the effect of poverty on women in the society are three fundamental conditions and problems in Eliot's "Sweeney Erect".

THE DUPLICITY OF HUMANS

It is obvious that duplicity is one of the main situations of every society. It cannot be neglected as unimportant problem. As an excellent example the sense of duplicity between the modern men is one of the motifs in "Sweeney Erect". In this poem Sweeney as the protagonist may represent all men in the modern world, with their hidden personalities and Sweeney's appearance represents human beings but in spirit acts as an animal without the features of one to be a human. From the light of that following two lines we can understand that fact:

"Who had not seen the silhouette
Of Sweeney straddled" (Lines 27-28).

LACK OF THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG HUMAN BEINGS

Lack of relationship between human beings is another motif of the poem which is the source of separation and everyday problem between man and woman or the individuals in the society. In the poem, Eliot emphasizes on the bad or negative relationship between them, those characters in the poem such as Ariadne that Eliot refers to in the second stanza, or Aspatia had a bad experience with their lovers with falling down into a bad psychological situation. From the epigraph that Eliot takes from Beaumont and Fletcher's play *The Maid's Tragedy* we can find out that Aspatia had a restless life and all the time she feels hopeless because she has been betrayed by her lover Amintor:

And the trees about me
Let them be dry and leafless ('Sweeney Erect's Epigraph).

Moreover, Mariwan Barzinji has obviously stated the lady that Sweeney spent his night with is another victim of the result of having unsuccessful relationship who faced bad behaviors with the other humans and she was used just as a machine for filling their lust and ambitions without taking care of her feelings. Eliot, by using those characters represents modern man in modern society with a big trouble which is the lack of the social relation.

THE EFFECT OF POVERTY ON WOMEN IN THE SOCIETY

Another problem that appears in "Sweeney Erect" is the effect of poverty on the individuals especially women that led them to do immoral things in order to earn money. Furthermore, poverty is not just about lack of money also those women feel another poverty which is the sexual-poverty because of being abandoned by their lovers and they turn to brothel to fill that gap in their lives, without caring whether it is unethical or not. The Lady who spent her night with Sweeney is one of those women who feels that space in her life and turns to brothel with the hope of earning money or filling sexual space:

This withered root of knots of hair
Slitted below and gashed with eyes (Lines 13-14).

THE IMAGE OF WOMAN IN ELIOT'S "SWEENEY ERECT"

The image of woman has a pattern of evolution in Eliot's "Sweeney Erect" which is from negation to affirmation. T.S. Eliot has frequently been described the misogynistic treatment of women in "Sweeney Erect". The image of modern woman is painted as whore and immoral

people; Eliot always tries to put a major focus on their character in his poem. In this poem, he presents woman in a negative way. This image of negative woman arises from the present day sterile relationship between man and woman. With changing times materialism has given birth to vices like doubt, deceit and betrayal, also makes the relationship between man and woman rootless, immoral and full of desolation and fraction. The sound of the poem is a sad tale of separation, ignorance, desolation and lack of caring for woman. In "Sweeney Erect" Eliot sheds light on Greece mythology to make a connection between past and present time which means modern age due to the same problem which is desolation that existed in both times. The epigraph of the poem is used for introducing the major themes of the poem, the themes of violence and sexuality and ill sexual relations of woman:

And the trees about me,
Let them be dry and leafless; let the rocks
Groan with continual surges; and behind me
Make all a desolation. Look, Look, wench! (Sweeney Erect's Epigraph).

Eliot pointed to the epigraph in his poem that shows a woman who was betrayed by her lover, she suffered from a painful life without hope and her lover ruined her sweet life. The words "leafless", "continual surges", "desolation" clearly determine her suffering. Aspatia is a heroine character of Beaumont and Fletcher's play *The Maid's Tragedy* who faced violence and loneliness given a role in the first stanza that Aspatia asks her servants to paint the image of Ariadne who was a woman as Aspatia betrayed by her lover. The words "waste shore", "bold" and "yelping seas" show Ariadne's sordid life and the level of violence in her life. Also it is the same for Nausicaa.

Nevertheless in the following stanzas a lady appears from a brothel. Eliot portrayed an ugly picture of that woman who has immoral personality with a restless life. This woman represents the modern women's behavior when they face social, economic and psychological problems they turn to do unethical things such as working as prostitutes in order to gain money or to fill their spiritual aspect as they feel negligence and on the other hand to fill the physical aspect as a woman.:

This withered root of knots of hair
Slitted below and gashed with eyes ("Sweeney Erect" Lines 13-14).

Eliot from the description of the women assumed them to be prostitutes and showed the misogynistic and repulsive figure of them. "Epileptic seizure" in the following lines show the pain and shriek of woman on the bed:

The epileptic on the bed
Curves backward, clutching at her sides ("Sweeney Erect" Lines 31-32).

The word "Epileptic" has many different definitions and this is ambiguity that Eliot uses to describe the woman on the bed at the final stanzas:

A-This epileptic may have come from the violence of the sexual activity between the lady and Sweeney. The lady from the pain and unkind manner of Sweeney went through that situation and she has been dehumanized and reduced to body parts and gestures.

B-From another perspective the epileptic figure may have come from the level of pleasure from the time of seizing their night and the woman arrived the highest point of pleasure (orgasm).

C-Another view of the epileptic is that whether the woman has hysteria as a disease and this is common if she faced that situation or not and as Brooker claimed that the critics assumed she is an epileptic woman her ruckus on the bed is an epileptic fit. (434).

D-If we look at the whole poem we can see that all of those women that Eliot talked about are those who deserted by their lovers and they could not forget them, the lady that Sweeney spent his night with may be one of them and has her hidden story behind her coming to that brothel, her shrieking is for her lover, and all the time she thinks of him and faces this situation that makes all those in the corridor see her as an epileptic seizure.

The poem is a brothel poem which is not just about that lady who spent her night with Sweeney. Nonetheless Eliot pointed to other whores in the brothel as they feel the same feeling that the lady on the bed has or as if they were her. In this poem Eliot tries to reflect a society concerned exclusively with trivial refinement that led to the debasement the whole society as in the "involved" or "disgraced" from ninth stanza Eliot describes them as a whole modern women from the modern period.

THE MAIN THEMES OF THE POEM "SWEENEY ERECT"

Myth and Misogyny

Myth and misogyny are one of the main themes in Eliot's brothel poem which is "Sweeney Erect". Eliot bounded myth and misogyny in "Sweeney Erect" as Bellour claimed that "woman hatred, in Eliot's poem, is better sequestered by the mythic method, because mythic structures are repeated throughout history" (12). Myth is a style that Eliot refers to by showing different images of mythical events such as use of Greek mythology in a different position in his poem. For example at the beginning of "Sweeney Erect" Eliot points to some mythical sad story of an unsuccessful woman in love, they were betrayed by their lovers. One of those is the sad tale of Aspatia, he refers to Aspatia by using an epigraph before of the poem. Aspatia who has been betrayed by her lover encourages her attendants to be aware of men and be careful about love because of her bad memories of love and men. Also in the first and second stanzas Eliot from the tongue of Aspatia recalls a pitiful story of another woman who has the same experience as Aspatia's. This

woman is Ariadne similar to Aspatia's tale. Also the story of "(Nausicaa and Polypheme)," ("Sweeney Erect" Line 10) have made us to go deeply in to the myth, but through those stories Eliot tries to tell us there is a connection between those mythical stories and the modern man's condition because modern man is milted from their an extraordinary behavior as human characters in the legend events, most of the human beings are disloyal, neglecter and betrayer as those partners that Eliot pointed to, when they left their lovers and never returned, Sweeney and his sleep partner is an obvious example that represent modern man that they have the same destiny. Another perspective of that poem is the misogynistic side that Eliot focuses on by alluding to those mythical story and mixing them with modern human's criminal scene. Eliot used the misogynistic method to describe a hidden aspect of twentieth century society. The hidden criminal scene that daily faced the woman in her society, by using this technique he pinpoints their sordid life but despite the fact that this method make a strong hatred against woman. "Sweeney Erect" is one of the most misogynistic poems Eliot had written" (Bellour 11), clear up that quotation we have to do a revision to that poem in detail after that many ugly picture of woman move closely in front of our eyes, for example Ariadne was a woman who helps his lover to murder another person after that falls in love with a murderer, but actually Eliot tells us Ariadne herself was a betrayer who betrayed human's aesthetic for the sake of another thing made an animalistic action, in deed she is a betrayer who betrayed by another betrayer. Also Aspatia who was unproductive woman who had not a nice spirit and all time connects herself with others, from another side Nausicaa was similar to Aspatia, otherwise there is another woman that Eliot by showing her characteristic figure makes reader hate woman because of her personality and that woman is Sweeney's Lady. Through drawing an imaginary picture for Sweeney's Lady there is no room to search for a nice point of her, she is a prostitute and Eliot destroyed all the moral feature of her by giving her a bad disposition, also she is one of those who had the same experience as Aspatia and others and Eliot verify them as they are representative of all the woman around the world and Eliot attacked their personality as a woman. In the same misogynistic picture Eliot merged modern woman and mythic woman's view, they lived in different age but same scenario. Eliot in his brothel poem refers to Emerson's speech from the seventh stanza "The lengthened shadow of a man / Is history, said Emerson" ("Sweeney Erect" Lines 25-26), we can take a benefit from this quotation to clarify that fact which action we have done led us to another one and it will be a part of the future, our future is the reflection of our past, this speech is clearly shown in that poem for example Sweeney's Lady is one of those people that her past led her to find herself in a house which is full of lack of meaning of humanity, when she was born she was not like that but her

action and the situation of her life made her to live like a prostitute, the lengthened shadow of her, is her past. This is true for other mythical women such as Ariadne, or maybe that speech is for connect modern woman and mythical characters in the poem, it means Sweeney's Lady is the lengthened shadow of those mythical women, what she go through is the same as those as Emerson claims that we are Greeks (Sano 14), that destiny passed down to her.

VIOLENCE AND SEXUALITY

World War I was one of the reasons behind writing this poem by Eliot which had a great effect on people's life. War is associated with violence. So, in wartime especially in London, "violence reached into every corner of civilian life, coloring and intensifying all aspects of personal life, including the sexual." (Brooker 424).

Eliot's troubled marriage was another reason that influenced Eliot in his writing. The Sweeney poems were written between 1917 and 1919, during the wartime and the first years of Eliot's marriage (Brooker 424). Girard claims that "sexuality and violence are closely related in all cultures and religions, and further, that in some instances, they are interchangeable" (qtd. in Brooker 424), they cannot be separated easily as they both have some similar characteristics such as: "shedding of blood... resulting in injury and death, as in war and childbirth" (Brooker 425).

"Sweeney Erect" is one of the disturbing poems written during the wartime. Readers or someone who is interested in Eliot's poems cannot understand the poem easily because the poem holds deep meanings and messages, but it is clear that there is violence in the poem.

If we look at the beginning of the poem, there are several scenes of violence in nature which are connected somehow to those violent actions that human beings do against themselves or others:

Paint me a cavernous waste shore
Cast in the unstilled Cyclades,
Paint me the bold anfractuons rocks
Faced by the snarled and yelping seas. ("Sweeney Erect"'s
Epigraph 1-4).

The lines above are connected with Greek mythology that the scenes show the images of violence, the words "unstilled", "bold", "snarled" and "yelping" symbolize the violence of nature, these scenes are not just simple lines that Eliot used to beautify his poem, he connected them with human actions, human in general and Sweeney in particular are associated with the violence of nature, the "snarled" and "yelping" seas show violence to the rocks, the rocks are static and stable, they cannot prevent the anger of the sea when it tries to void its rudeness. The shore maybe faced violence such as natural disaster, so it became wasted. If we look at that poem from the literary perspective Eliot made a comparison between that violence which is made to the rocks and shore as the

violence which is made against the epileptic woman on the bed, the nature and Sweeney are alike due to their rudeness, passionless and selfishness that they did not care about those who were around them and the woman is similar to the rocks as she is powerless and unable of defending.

According to the following lines, Eliot moves from nature's violence to human's sexuality connected with violence. Violence can be seen easily in the following stanza which Eliot described by using different words that refer to having violence after the sexual activity and the responses to it from the victim or the lady:

Tests the razor on his leg
Waiting until the shriek subsides.
The epileptic on the bed
Curves backward, clutching at her sides. ("Sweeney Erect" 29-32)

In the above lines and in fourth and fifth stanzas Eliot mentioned the names of different tools such as: "jackknives", "razors" and "sickles" which are all instruments designed for human's normal daily use, for instance sickles are used for cutting grass and razors for shaving, but those tools can be used in a wrong way such as in hurting, injuring and murdering.

The title itself which holds the name of a man can be considered as a reference to an earlier person who was characterized with violence. The name in the title who is Sweeney whose name is mentioned in the poem may refer to "Sweeney Todd" who was a barber in London, his violence was in his job. While he was shaving those who went to a barber shop, he cut their throats (Muhammed 2).

Also Eliot described Sweeney's use of violence toward the lady on the bed in those lines determined:

The sickle motion from the thighs
Jackknives upward at the knees
Then straightens out from heel to hip
Pushing the framework of the bed
And clawing at the pillow slip. ("Sweeney Erect" 16-20).

Sweeney's violence at the time of the sexual activity is abnormal, his description while they were having the sex is just like a murderer's attitude towards the victim not as a human who does the process based on love, honor and strong relationship, Sweeney acts as that barber that we mentioned before, but Eliot mentioned those barbering instruments "sickle" and "jackknives" not as real tools of barbering, he used them as a representative of Sweeney's parts of body at the time of erection at the time of sexing. The Lady's responses by clawing at the pillow shows her pain while Sweeney violently spent his night with.

Nonetheless in the fourth stanza Eliot used the verbs "slitted, gashed, cropped – [which] point to slaughter, rather than shaving or farming. The responses – shrieking, clawing, clutching one's sides – are consistent with having been attacked or wounded" (Brooker 428). Eliot's use of those verbs is to clarify the ferocity that happens in the brothel.

Eliot in the following stanza presents the lady on the bed as a model to represent the other prostitutes who work in the house.

The ladies of the corridor
Find themselves involved, disgraced,
Call witness to their principles
And deprecate the lack of taste. ("Sweeney Erect" 33-36)

The ladies find themselves involved in the sexual violence done by Sweeney as if they are whores, so they face the same experience of sexual violence from men whom they do the sexual activities with (Bellour 18). Eliot depicted violence and sexuality not just about those characteristics in the poem, he portray a modern society that associated with them.

SELF-IMPORTANCE AND CARELESSNESS

Lack of human characteristics made Eliot write for every single problem on the shape of verses and "Sweeney Erect" is one of his dreadful poems that illustrates that fact. Self-importance is one of the main appearance of 20th century society and despite of that it is one of the main theme of Eliot's "Sweeney Erect" which is the reflection of the social problems of that time and also it is a part from now. As twentieth century began, a darkening shadow moved across the face of Europe, this shadow was propelled by man. This darkening shadow was made because of lacking a communication and loyalty between the individual in modern society, it paved the way to open several gaps in daily life such as separation, lust, and self-importance and so on. Those social spaces moved toward society and spread as a murderer between families and all the members of community. "Sweeney Erect" hides the meaning of life in self, it talk about meaninglessness, carelessness and unconsciousness and it is about those humans who care about themselves only without turning back and see what disaster remains after them. Eliot describe the characteristics of the Sweeney as an asocial man in the sixth stanza:

Sweeney addressed full length to shave
Broadbottomed, pink from nape to base,
Knows the female temperament
And wipes the suds around his face (*Sweeney Erect*, lines 21-24)

Sweeney is a man of meaninglessness, a man who never cares about a woman from an epileptic seizure, a man after filling his desire start to shave, the word "shave" is a symbol of self-importance and carelessness of a man from a situation that instead of taking care of that woman that her scream made others to be afraid it doesn't matter if she is a prostitute or not but he starts shaving as if he never made a crime against another human and undisturbed by a girl's shrieking (Hyman 44). Nonetheless, whenever we want to talk about Sweeney and make our mind busy with the story of those mythical personages at the preceding stanzas. Eliot merges modern

brothel houses with Greek mythology as they are two sides of the same coin, we find self-importance in the scenes of murder, abandon, negligence and one side love at the mythical stanzas of that poem, Ariadne helped her lover in a killing process but her lover left her because of his self-importance above his fake love and left her till death.

HUMAN DESIRE AND ANIMALITY

Human desire and animality is one of the clear thematic images in the "Sweeney Erect". Desire is a sense of longing or hoping for a person, object, or outcome, the same sense is expressed by emotional feeling such as "craving". When a person desires something or someone, his/her sense of longing is excited by the enjoyment. Eliot in this poem mixed human desire and lust with the animal figure, that they are closely related to each other. From the content of the poem Eliot determines a man who has the spirit of animal, that man is "Sweeney" who makes a desolation after quenching his desire but because of his bestly figure who did not care about the woman unless she is prostitute. After reading this poem in a deeper way our mind brings us to the concepts of Darwin who talks about the origin of human beings, according to "Darwin's myth of evolution, which was in vogue in the modern times, human beings are descendants of ape-like ancestors." (Bellour 14). It is clear that this concept is reflected in Eliot's "Sweeney Erect" if we look at the third stanza of the poem;

Morning stirs the feet and hands
(Nausicaa and Polypheme),
Gesture of orang-outang
Rises from the sheets in steam ("Sweeney Erect" 9-12)

These lines are associated with Greek mythology. Eliot merges our imaginations with mythical tale of Polyphemus, which was a one-eyed monster in Greek mythology and Eliot compares Sweeney's action and behavior to it because he is an "orang-outang" and holds the animal and monster characteristics, his animality can be seen clearly in his behaviors and features (Bellour 13). Brooker states that "the image of an orangutan shaving before a mirror, is taken from Edgar Allan Poe's justly celebrated "Murders in the Rue Morgue." (431). In one of the scenes the ape stands in front of a mirror and holds a razor for shaving after committing a crime, nevertheless in the "Sweeney Erect" this scene is repeated when Sweeney stands in front of the mirror with a razor in his hand to shave after having a sexual activity. If we make a comparison between the ape of Poe's story and Eliot's "Sweeney", we find out that they are closely similar to each other. From this we can interpret their behaviors in two ways: firstly maybe they want to shave to clean themselves from the crime that they made and from their bestly appearance and the shaving is a symbol of

purification from a sin, and secondly we can say that that shaving is not for purification, it is a symbol of continuity on their animalistic spirit as if nothing happened. According to Cambridge dictionary "orang-outang" means a large ape with reddish-brown hair and long arms. Eliot used the words of "feet" and "hands" to represent the whole parts of the body and also Palmer supports this idea by saying that the use of these bodily part instead of the whole is for the purpose of dehumanization, and he also suggested that Sweeney's description is a form of dehumanization (Bellour 14), also Palmer connected this words with Darwinian theories as he claims that "this fragmentation of the body reflects Darwinian evolution in a concentrated form: hands-feet-spine-standing up, from "Orang-outang" to man." (Bellour 14).

Sweeney's torrid desire for the woman on the bed is out of and far from any meaning of humanism and human's accepted whims toward a lady that Sweeney spent his night with only to quench his disgusting whims and then he left the woman carelessly with an empty mind just like an animal that do the sexual activity just for filling the sexual desire and leaving the place without thinking of her feelings and what may happen to her after the process, and what will be her responses to the emotionless relationship at that night (Bellour 14). The bond between Sweeney and the unnamed woman is not based on love and acceptable men and women communication, it is based on animalistic sex activity done by an ape-like.

Sweeney's sensual and cruel desire toward the epileptic woman is animalistic, from readers' point of view; Sweeney is like an animal and beast by looking at his appearance and his behavior. From Sweeney's point of view, the woman is like an animal, he looks at her as a prey to be caught by him as a hunter.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing "Sweeney Erect" thematically, it becomes obvious that the poem describes modern societies and criticizes people's behaviors, attitudes and personalities. The poem has many different images of men that engaged with their uncompleted life and they are far from happiness, restfulness and love. The poem talks about social violence and sexual desire of human beings. Also it is a poem that expresses carelessness, misogynistic perspective and the selfishness of modern man in the modern age. "Sweeney Erect" is Eliot's imaginations of modern humans who are melted in their unconsciousness of being mankind. The characters in the poem are careless about what happens around them and they do not want to be conscious about it. Eliot by writing this poem tries to tell modern people of their situation. T. S. Eliot during his life concerned with man's problems and his poem contains some important themes; violence and sexuality

is one of the main themes. "Sweeney Erect" reflects the circumstances and conditions of the modern society, it means society after world war, and it is a real description of its people who are suffering from lack of communication and relationship. Eliot focused on the level of violence at the time of sexual activity and between lovers in the poem.

The theme of self-importance and carelessness in the life of modern humans and those characters in the poem clarify that modern men are selfish, they do not care about others and they are empty of love, respect and honor.

Due to human desire modern men behave like animals in the poem. Eliot depicted the men of his age as ape-like, they are filled with animal spirit, and they faced down fall in their lives because they are empty from emotion and just want to quench their awful whims.

At the end Eliot's aim is to make people think and be aware of the changes that need a strong spirit to confront dehumanization process that faces the society.

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