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T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes as a Satirical Drama

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Abstract:

This research paper mainly deals with the satirical aspects in T. S. Eliot's one act play *Sweeney Agonistes*. The significance of the title character "Sweeney" lies in the fact that it figures out in four poems which have preceded the appearance of *Sweeney Agonistes*, which gives this character certain significance. This play is essentially regarded as being a satirical drama, which indicates Eliot's modern satirical style. The play depicts the horrible aspects of modern life among people ignorant of the spiritual knowledge which may lead them to the path of salvation.

To mention his full name, Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) is a British, essayist, publisher, dramatist, social critic, and one of the most prominent poets of the twentieth century. As a matter of fact, he is an American expatriate who has eventually been naturalized as a British citizen in 1927. His poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) is regarded as his masterpiece and representative of the modernist movement of poetry. This poem has been followed by other significant poems among which *The Waste Land* is most famous. He has written seven plays, especially *Murder in the Cathedral* which permits him to be awarded the Noble Prize in Literature in 1948 for his poetic contribution to modern poetry.

The formal satire of the eighteenth century deliberately reflected in neoclassical poetry in most of its genres was no longer of special and major interest to literary men of the late eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the satiric spirit did never cease or disappear, for satire has incidentally to figure out here and there in works of art. Eliot's masterpiece "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" shows the most brilliant satire made against the social and political institutions of the time; his comparison of the evening sky to "a patient etherized upon a table" is regarded a shocking yet offensive remark. The poem unfolds the conscious experience of a man expressing his great sorrow and regret for the fact that he is mentally and physically inert, whose carnal and sensual love has not been attained. Here is a symbol of the inertia of the political and social and even religious institutions which have failed to spiritually and physically save the individual from the horrors of the first World War. These institutions are being satirized and attacked by Eliot using symbolic connotations. Eliot's *The Waste Land* becomes a landmark in the satirical writings of modern times, being satirical of the contemporary life, events and the problems of the individual and of the new civilization as a whole. Barbara Everett (1984: 243) has her say in this respect:

[Eliot] made his first strictly dramatic attempt, the result was two fragments of verse dialogue which are best understood in terms of their satiric hinterland. *Sweeney Agonistes* is essentially, and to an almost Jonsonian degree, intended as 'satiric-drama'. indeed, Eliot achieved his breakthrough into drama not by virtue of a painfully-acquired stagecraft, but by the discovery and mastery of a new and essentially modern satirical style.

After having written his poem *Ash Wednesday*, Eliot devotes his poetic energy to writing poetic drama—comedies or plays whose endings show redemptive intentions, though they are intended to be a sort of entertainment to a large group of people. In *Sweeney Agonistes* Eliot presents something

unusual, which indicates that he has the ability to be a gifted dramatist. His poetic characters are more real and more memorable than those created by his contemporaries, being realistic and expressive of the dilemma of the modern society: "his critical essays on drama show an understanding not only literary but also theatrical. So it was natural that, at a moment when he felt the need, both personally and professionally, for a new line of creative work, his mind should turn to the drama" (E. Martin Browne, 1969: 1). He has aspired to adopt a new form of writing other than poetry which is poetic drama. he has tried his hand on writing a play entitled *Sweeney Agonistes* whose main character figures out in some of his previous poems. This play has not been completed, and thus it is followed by the publication of two scenes from it, which are entitled *Fragment of a Prologue* (1926) and *Fragment of an Agon* (1927). These two scenes are published under the heading of *Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of Aristophanic Melodrama*. The latter publication is considered one work of art, a one-act play, though its author intends to consider them two. The play is intended to show the rhythm of the jazz music and of the English language as well, being written in verse. The title of the play is sometimes written with the subtitle *Fragments of Aristophanic Melodrama*. Eliot (in K .S. Misra, 1977: 10) states a very important remark concerning the production of poetic drama in general and *Sweeney Agonistes* in particular, saying:

The Elizabethan drama was aimed at a public which wanted entertainment of a crude sort, but would stand a good deal of poetry; our problem should be to take a form of entertainment, and subject it to the process which would leave it a form of art. Perhaps the music hall comedian is the best material.

Misra (1977: 10) goes back to the genesis of the play, saying that Eliot has decided to quit poetry and try to write the kind of drama related to modern life in the form of rhythmic prose to be accentuated by the beats of drum and "furnished with flat sort of people."

The subtitle of the play, *Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of Aristophanic Melodrama*, sure implies that it is a satire of special kind relevant to contemporary life. Eliot has left as a fragment because he believes that what it says is quite what it aspires to unfold. The play is made in conformity with classical Greek satirical drama, and it remains a fragment which has not been completed because, as Roz Kavaney (www.theguardian.com...TS Eliot) believes, "it is a living remnant of a dead culture and should not be whole." Eliot's "The Hollow Men" implies the death and emptiness of language: it is "quite meaningless/as wind in dry grass/or rat's feet;" hence, in *Sweeney Agonistes* the title character speaks to others, saying that he is unable to use the language in a correct manner about significant issues: "well here again that don't apply/but I gotta use

words when I talk to you." Sweeney briefly appears in the poems that have preceded this play and never speaks—"Sweeney Among the Nightingales" (1918), "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" (1918), "Sweeney Erect" (1919) and *The Waste Land* (1922). He just figures out in the second part of the play under consideration, specifically in "Fragment of an Agon" in which he appears to be the main character that speaks most of the dialogue.

Zsuzsa Rawlinson (www.c3.hu > [prophi004](#) SWEENEY2.) envisions that the subtitle of the play is to further explained, saying that the play is regarded as *Aristophanic* perhaps on the grounds that it amalgamates both the comic and the tragic, "the crackling social satire with the plight of Western man," and it is referred to as a melodrama because it is combined with music, for the use of the figure of speech onomatopoeia, stresses, iterations and music and songs contribute to the musical effect intentionally created by the author to be in accordance with the jazz beat. To add, the use of flat characters is another feature of melodrama. Hence, all the characters in the play are flat with the exception of Sweeney. Eliot (1933) himself declares the following remark:

My intention was to have one character whose sensibility and intelligence should be on the plane of the most sensitive and intelligent members of the audience; his speeches should be addressed to them, as much as to the other personages in the play—or rather, should be addressed to the latter, who were to be material, literal-minded and visionless by the former.

Furthermore, flat characters contribute to the postponement of the ending of the play "in the sense that the play is a commentary on the postponement of the spiritual awakening in modern man," (Smith, 1963: 74) which points to the moral lesson the dramatist wants to convey. The play is then a social and moral satire written to expose a serious problem concerning man, especially his respite of his awareness of the desirable spirituality which he once deserted. Eliot has his word in this respect, which may contribute to the understanding of the moral implications of the title and subtitle of the play; he says (1933):

To those who have experienced the full horror of life, tragedy is still inadequate--..In the end horror and laughter may be one...there is potential comedy in Sophocles and potential tragedy in Aristophanes.

Two female prostitutes appear in "Fragment of a prologue". They are Doris Dorrance and Dusty who are usually visited by a former soldier who was once in the Canadian Expeditionary Force and who used to bring along with him his close friends, Mr. Krumpacker and Mr. Klipstein, two

American businessmen, and Captain Horsfall. All those characters figure in the play, together with Swarts and Snow who are minor ones. Interestingly enough, Doris also appears with Sweeney in Eliot's "Sweeney Erect."

When examining the evolution of *Sweeney Agonistes*, it should be noted that Eliot has written prior to it certain fragments published in *The Criterion* in 1926, which are combined together to form the present play being explored. Therefore, it must be concluded that the bringing of these fragments together into one association is threefold, according to Misra (1977: 11) who declares that the play is

associated with the old Greek comedy in its blend of laughter, music, satire exaggeration and theatricality; secondly, it is linked with the modern music-hall comedy, with flat characters, ragtime songs, and gnomic language of dull conversation and cold mechanical communications.

The employment of the character of Sweeney in many and various works of art, in four poems and then one play, makes it of certain significance and potentiality; hence, Sweeney can be regarded as the important hero compatible to the hero of a satiric melodrama that addresses sexuality as being something tremendously dignified, which makes use of the musical play and the changing rhythm of the American language, as pointed out by Williamson George (1998: 195) who declares in this respect that

As a kind of musical-hall treatment of the Avenging Deities, this libretto exploits syncopated verse and resources of the American language. The result is a masterly incorporation of serious themes into the vulgar idiom, where they draw new life from the rhythms and politeness of crude society. By way of contrast it may be recalled that "Doris's Dream Songs" were in part incorporated into "The Hollow Men."

The theme of life like death has been thoroughly explored by Sweeney, when recalling his story and saying "what we gotta do." He tells his story, for "Nobody came/And nobody went." Being described in many poems written by Eliot, Sweeney is a familiar figure though now he appears in a drama. he is Eliot's character described in his poems, inactive character as he is, as being secular, sensual and unrefined; he is representative of the debased and debauched image which has been downgraded by humanity. Albeit, the character of Sweeney that figures out in the play is to represent the image of the modern man given the chance to express himself freely and communicate his ideas and insights; that is to say, he appears as an active

character that communicates and participates in the action of the play. The significant question to be raised in this regard is: Why should Eliot retain the name of Sweeney of the poems, that is representative of the shabbiness of the world, as Sweeney of the play, a rather developed character? One answer may be satisfactory. In the poems in which he figures out, Sweeney is representative of the horror and boredom facing modern man, and in the plays, he has been allotted much more ability to understand, discern and recognize things; now, he is able to unfold his voice and communicate with others, though having unrefined and comfortless and desolate.

As to the relationship between John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and Sweeney, it is noticeable that what relates them both is a figure of speech as exemplified in the following quotes: "To live a life half dead, a living death" (*Samson Agonistes*, I, 100), and "Death is life and life is death" (*Sweeney Agonistes*, p. 135). For the title word *Agonistes* is reminiscent of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* in which Samson faces a certain dilemma that is best expressed by Ms. Smith (1963: 73) who argues:

Samson's dilemma is that of the exile in an alien world who feels compelled by divine will to pull that world down around his own head in order to destroy its iniquities. Sweeney is perhaps another spiritual outcast in a corrupt world, and he too must destroy himself in his attack on that world.

Eliot often uses particular epigraphs necessary and significant to the explanation of his works. The epigraphs positioned at the beginning of the two fragments indirectly give information about the theme of spirituality contained in the play, whose order hints at a certain connection between them both:

Orestes: you don't see
Them, you don't—but I
See them:
they are hunting me
down, I must move on. (*Choephorio*)
Hence the soul cannot be
possessed of the divine itself
of the love of created
beings. (St. John of the Cross)

it is indicated that the first epigraph points to Orestes's exit when he immediately becomes conscious of the Furies haunting him with the view to killing him after his crime; it is pointed out that the killer of a mother should be inflicted by a sense of sin and remorse which makes him live apart from humanity, whereas the second epigraph is related to *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* which is illustrative of the mystical road leading to a union with God

(Smith, 1963: 74). Both quotes aims at purgation of the soul. Hence, Sweeney's account of murder and the horrible feeling of the murderer's idea that he is a living dead person points to the idea that penitent is to be undertaken for the sake of paving the way to purgation. Rawlinson (2016) gives a valuable comment in this regard:

According to St. John of the Cross, man must be purged of all human affections and desires if the distance between the creator and the creature is to be bridged. In this argument, affections represent dependence on the senses and make demand on humans which inevitably and irrecoverably cut them off from their first duty, that is from their complete attention to God's love.

The first fragment of the play exposes a society that is hollow and living in the jazz age characterized by banal remarks and trivial way of life. it is reminiscent of Eliot's *The Hollow Men* in which there is the following description of the men's triviality:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!...

The main speakers in this part are Dusty and Doris who have a lower social standing than that of Prufrock who says "I have measured out my life with coffee-spoons." Therefore, it may be concluded that Eliot "has carved characteristic poetry out of their trivial speech which aptly mirrors the vacuity of their inner life. Eliot thus satirizes the trivialities which result from the civilized life comparable to animality—the kind of life from which Sweeney yearns to escape.

The idea of life-in-death is also examined thoroughly in Eliot's earlier poems, *The Waste Land* and *The Four Quartets*, in which the idea that the purgatorial flames are so necessary for the purgation of the soul of man that the latter may attain the word of God. Water imagery is made a symbol of birth and baptism, as it is exemplified by Sweeney:

Birth, and copulation,
And death
That is all the facts when
You come to brass tacks. (p.131)

The idea of the sacred purgatorial water conducive to rebirth is further expressed by Sweeney as he keeps on saying:

Birth, and copulation,
And death
I've been born, and once
Is enough.

You don't remember, but
Once is enough. (p.133)

"once is enough" is being repeated twice to indicate Sweeney's unwillingness to be reborn into a community void of the spiritual link with the word of God. The unpleasantness and hideousness seen by Sweeney motivates him to have the desire to communicate his awareness of them to his addressee, Doris, to whom he laughingly expresses his desire to take her to a cannibal isle for the sake of deserting that community:

SWEENEY: I'll carry you
Off

To a cannibal isle.

DORIS: You will be the cannibal!

SWEENEY: You will be the missionary!

You will be my seven

Stone missionary!

I'll gobble you up. I'll be
the cannibal.

.....
I'll convert you!

Into a stew.

DORIS: You wouldn't eat
me!

SWEENEY: Yes I'd eat
you!

In a nice little, white
little, soft little, tender
little,

juicy little, right little
missionary stew. (p.133)

This flirtatious horseplay and noisy fun made between the men and the two women when drinking in a party provides the play with a sinister atmosphere of seduction, and perhaps of rape and murder. The reference to cannibal isle is expressive of the idea that it is a place void of all signs of civilization with all its trapping elements. Hence, Eliot wants to satirize the fact that "our mental desolation is further intensified by our sexual deprivation that has become automatic, monotonous and apathetic" (Rawlinson, 2016). This indicates that modern society has failed to live up the refined ideals, principles and norms of antiquity. Nevertheless, moralizing occurs amidst moments of drunkenness, and as follows:

DORIS: That's not life,
that's not life
why I'd just as soon as be
dead.

SWEENEY: That's what
 life is. Just is
 DORIS: What is?
 What's that life is?
 SWEENEY: Life is death.
 I knew a man once did a
 girl in— (p.133)

Doris is greatly terrified by the image of the spades before the beginning of the party, which creates to her an atmosphere of horror and threat, for Sweeney himself might be the person who "once did a girl in" and , in consequence, Doris might face the same fate. In the poems prior to *Sweeney Agonistes*, the character of Sweeney never speaks. Here, in this play, he only speaks in the second part. Hence, the inability or the difficulty to communicate can be considered another theme in Eliot's works—poetry and drama. Sweeney then tells how life looks like on a "crocodile isle." It is the place where there is nothing to represent the modern civilization—telephones, motorcars, etc.; he says it is the place where one can see palms, the sea and the sounds of the surfs. He proceeds to declare that there are only three things in life which are: birth, copulation and death. Then come the songs sung by Wauchope and Horsfall on the one hand, and Klipstein and Krumpacker, which are illustrative of the daily routine followed by people every day and which ends with "night" or the idea of death, as it were. In the songs, they express a muddle or confusion representative of life on the isle. To Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (1974: 289), the account of life on the island "is a rather jumbled affair—and one supposes that the poet satirically meant it to be so."

The chorus presents their "finale," the closing instrumental composition with the view to giving a connection between Sweeney's story and the implications related to the other characters. This is "the communal yet marvellously colloquial expression of terror and fear:

FULL CHORUS: When you are 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 on the head
 you 've had a cream of a nightmare dream and
 you've got the hoo-ha's coming to you.
 Hoo hoo hoo
 You dreamt you waked up at seven o'clock and
 It's
 Foggy and it's damp and it's dawn and it's dark
 And you wait for a knock and the turning of a
 Lock
 For you know the hangman's waiting for you.

And perhaps you're alive
And perhaps you're dead
Hoo ha ha
Hoo ha ha
Hoo
Hoo
Hoo
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
KNOCK
KNOCK
KNOCK. (P.136)

Terror and fear are being expressed in a nightmarish expression pointing to what will happen to all mankind, which is made more noticeable by the use of the determined chase of the chorus's hoo-ha. Rawlison (2016) comments that that is a modern description of the 'Hounds of Heaven' theme where the Furies will not only haunt us but will also hunt us down to mete out our punishment." The rhythm of the whole poem is of certain importance, which is expressive of man's desperate situation which shows no hope, and as it is further explained by Rawlinson (2016):

The function of the play's all-persuasive rhythm gains further significance here. On the one hand, the ominous pounding rhythm contributes to sustaining and intensifying the looming menace of the hunt and audibly re-enacts the chase where the pursuing feet are closing in on the prey. It also represents the violent pulse-beat of the pursuer and the pursued. On the other hand, the monotonous rhythm...and jazz beat reiterates the truth about the senselessness and meaninglessness of human existence. The hunting music of despair is mankind's, his desperate incantation to drive the desolation of hopes.

Interestingly enough, it is indicated that the dramatic Sweeney is quite different from the "apeneck Sweeney" that appears in Eliot's poems mentioned already, for Sweeney's spiritual condition has been raised, being made the hero of the play. Eliot could have given him another name but he did not. Perhaps Eliot wants to say *now speaks the silent Sweeney* which indicates a character development and contributes to the idea that the character of Sweeney is no longer passive and begins to satirize the spiritual hollowness of the present civilization; that is to say, even the silent "apeneck Sweeney" could not help seeing the social decay of his society, and as

explicated by Misra (15) who points to the change in his personality, being a character endowed with superiority and exceptional cleverness: "Sweeney is different from his namesake in the poems because he utters deeper truths and points to the spiritual hollowness of the sophisticated, superficial society around him." Thus, the theme and imagery of the play echo *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* which concentrate on the idea of a civilized society void of spirituality, being very superficial. The "fortunetelling" and the "cards," are all reminiscent of *The Waste Land*. It may be suggested that the dramatic Sweeney sums up, in a fit of explosion, the satire made against the state of the desperate, horrified individual of modern society; even the dump Sweeney is made to unfold truths about modern society in a philosophical yet sophisticated manner. As to the importance of the play, it should be mentioned that it presents a magnificent "stylistic experiment: in its attempt, which is remarkably successful, to create verse out of the language actually spoken by the superficial, sophisticated society of our mechanical age, with telephones, cars, jazz music, banal talk and petty social formalities" (Misra, 16)

الملخص

مياة ذات أطياف كدراما ساخرة

كمال والي

يتناول البحث استخدام العناصر الخارقة في مسرحية (مياة ذات أطياف) للكاتب المسرحي دبليو بي بيتس. أن البحث عبارة عن محاولة لتسليط الضوء علي أهمية ووظائف هذه العناصر الخارقة. لقد عاني بيتس لفترة طويلة من الزمن من حبه ليغير المتبادل لمود كون الجميلة التي لم يتمكن من الزواج منها لأنها رفضت جميع محاولاته في هذا الأمر. وعلي الرغم من ذلك وجد بيتس ضالته في عالم الأحلام الذي تمكن فيه من مصاحبة حبيبته الي عالم الحب والجمال الأبدي بمساعدة العوامل الخارقة مثل القيثارة السحرية والطيور ذات الرؤوس البشرية والمثولوجيا الايرلندية. تظهر في هذه المسرحية شخصيتان رئيسيتان هما فورجيل وديكتورا اللذان يمثلان بيتس ومود كون علي التوالي. يحقق بيتس في هذه المسرحية رغبته الشخصية باستخدام عنصر الخيال وأغراضه المسرحية في انجاز تجربة انسانية عامة وشاملة من خلال استخدام العناصر الخارقة والسحر والمثولوجيا الايرلندية