

Myth, Violence, and Misogyny in T.S. Eliot's "Sweeney Erect"

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Abstract

This article attempts to give a new reading to T.S. Eliot's use of myths. It vindicates that his allusions to Greek myths, in his poem "Sweeney Erect", is to reinforce his misogynistic views and to maintain the patriarchal traditions and ideologies. Through his reference to myths of violence, murder, and betrayal, Eliot portrays emotional life as a degeneration into savagery, primitivism, and animality. As the paper evinces, "Sweeney Erect" is one of the most misogynistic poems Eliot had written.

Keywords: Myth, Misogyny, Violence, Animality.

La visée de Cet article est de donner une nouvelle lecture des mythes chez T.S. Eliot. Le fait de s'inspirer de la mythologie grecque, dans son poème "Sweeney erectus", vise à consolider ses convictions misogynes et de maintenir les traditions et les idéologies patriarcales. Par ses références à aux mythes de la violence, du meurtre, et de la trahison, Eliot dépeint la vie émotionnelle comme une dégénérescence dans la sauvagerie, le primitivisme, et l'animalité. Le présent l'article montre que "Sweeney erectus" est l'un des poèmes les plus misogynes dans l'œuvre d'Eliot.

Mots Clés : Mythe, Misogynie, Violence, animalité.

ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى إعطاء قراءة جديدة للأسطورة عند ت.س. إليوت. كما يبينه المقال، فإن اقتباسه من الأساطير اليونانية في قصيدته الموسومة بـ "سويني المنتصب" تهدف إلى تعضيد كراهيته للمرأة و المحافظة على التقاليد و الإيديولوجيات الأبوسية. في توظيفه لأساطير العنف و القتل و الخيانة، فإن إليوت يصور الحياة العاطفية على أنها انحطاط إلى الوحشية و البدائية و الحيوانية. كما يوضحه المقال، فإن قصيدة "سويني المنتصب" هي من أكثر القصائد مقتا للمرأة.

الكلمات المفاتيح: الأسطورة، كراهية المرأة، العنف، الحيوانية

In his early years, Eliot showed an immense concern with origins. He considers fragments of primitive cultures very important. Hence, he wanted to preserve them. Jewel Spears Brooker remarks that Eliot, in his early years, “begins to focus his interest in origins on “survivals,” i.e., fragments of behavior and ritual which survive in contemporary culture long after their function is lost or forgotten. The survivals are crucial because, once recognized, they become part of the link between primitive and modern.”¹ Myth is a part of the tradition, which Eliot endorses and urges authors to respect and imbibe. The myths he makes allusions to, in his poems, are fragments of the patriarchal tradition, which have survived in the modern age. They ensure continuity between the past and the present. Misogyny, in Eliot’s “Sweeney Erect”, is but a continuation and a perpetuation of a long tradition, which has long regarded the feminine and heterosexuality with abhorrence. In Modernism, there is a revival of myths, which are seen as the best means to reflect the modern reality and to reinforce a sense of continuity between the past and the present. Hence, woman-hatred, in Eliot’s poem, is better sequestered by the mythic method, because mythic structures are repeated throughout history.

“Sweeney Erect” opens with a female speaker ordering wenches to paint images of a desolate land whose nature is lifeless. The speaker is Aspatia of *The Maid’s Tragedy*, a play written by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher. Aspatia orders her servants to weave a tapestry, which depicts the heroine Ariadne, who was deserted by the man she loved. Weighed down with sadness and sorrow, Aspatia views her own tragic story as a repetition of that of Ariadne. She identifies herself with her, and she asks them to take her as a model. She says: “*And the trees about me,/Let them be dry and leafless; let the rocks/Groan with continued surges; and behind me/Make all a desolation. Look, look, wenches.*”² The blighted and desolate land in the opening lines recalls to mind the myth of the fisher king in Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land”. The land, according to the myth, became infertile and waste because of an immoral sin committed by the king.

In Greek mythology, Ariadne was the daughter of King Minos. She fell deeply in love with Theseus, and she helped him enter the labyrinth to kill her brother, the Minotaur, by giving him a thread. Ariadne asked Theseus to marry her, but to her dismay, he did not seem to share her deep love. The two would be husband and wife left Crete in a ship to Athens. On their way home, they stopped at the island of Naxos. When she fell asleep, Theseus sailed to Athens, and he left her alone. When Ariadne awoke and found herself alone, she started weeping and bemoaning her lover’s desertion. Out of grief, she hanged herself. That is, she sacrificed herself on the alter of love. Ariadne’s strong passion might have reminded him of his father’s second wife, Medea, who killed her brother because of love. The allusion to Aspatia and Ariadne reveals the intersection between eroticism and violence and how, traditionally, the woman is subject to aggressive assaults by men. She has always been the victim of man’s disastrous desire. The myths of Ariadne and Aspatia emphasize the tradition of abusing the woman throughout history. Ariadne and Aspatia are types of the abandoned female. In discussing the allusion to Aspatia, in *The Maid’s Tragedy*, Eliot’s critics overlook the episode of the story where Aspatia dresses up like a man, pretending to be her brother in order to take revenge. But she was killed. The allusion to these myths highlights one of the major themes of the poem, the woman who is doomed to suffer the pain of desire inflicted by

man. Sweeney's woman is also abandoned by him after accomplishing his sordid affair with her. He has no sense of commitment or responsibility.

From the opening Greek setting, established by alluding to Ariadne and Aspatia, the poem moves on to a modern setting. The third stanza opens with a description of a morning awakening of an animal ramping in a bed: "Morning stirs the feet and hands"(44). But rather than giving a full account, there is only a description of parts of the human body, which seemingly revive from a slumber. The man seems to be mere flesh. The description is interrupted by an allusion to two figures from Homer's *Odyssey*: Nausicaa and Polyphemus. In Homer's *Odyssey*, and during his homecoming from the Trojan War, Odysseus and his friends passed the Island of the Cyclopes. While they were wandering in the island, they found a large cave, which they entered, ignoring that it was the home of the great Cyclopes Polyphemus, a one-eyed giant. When returning to his cave, Polyphemus found Odysseus and his men there. He incarcerated them inside by blocking the entrance of the cave with a big rock. In the morning, he fed on some of Odysseus's men. To save his own life and that of his men, Odysseus gave Polyphemus a strong and dazing wine, which made him lose his consciousness. When asked for the name of the person, who offered him drink, Odysseus gave him the name "nobody". When Polyphemus slept, Odysseus drove a wooden stake, which he hardened in fire, in Polyphemus's eye. Before letting his sheep leave the cave to graze, Odysseus and his men tied themselves to the underside of the sheep to escape. The allusion to Polyphemus is probably meant to suggest that like him, Sweeney is a monster. His monstrosity is evident not just in his behavior, it is also reinforced by his man-animal attributes. His savagery and ravaging sexual drives are compared to Polyphemus's cannibalism. According to Girard, "In the mythological monster the "physical" and the "moral" are inseparable. The two are so perfectly combined that any attempt to separate them seems doomed to failure."³ He also states that "physical and moral monstrosity go together in mythology."(Scapegoat 35)

In addition to Polyphemus, Eliot alludes to Nausicaa. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Nausicaa is the noble lady, who with her attendants, found Odysseus wrecked, because he had been wandering in the wilderness for a long time. Despite his unkempt and frightening appearance, which was more akin to animals than to human beings, Nausicaa felt a burning love for Odysseus. She became infatuated with him the first moment she set eyes on him. Thus, she invited him to her father's palace and offered him help and protection. Nausicaa, like Ariadne and Aspatia, is deserted by Odysseus with whom she fell in love. This severe act of abandoning the female occurs in "Sweeney Erect". The allusion to Nausicaa is also meant to evince that unlike her, Sweeney's lady is indecent. The allusion also suggests the nature of Sweeney as a man-beast or human animal. What emphasizes Sweeney's animality is the absence of communication between him and the lady. Indeed, the encounter between Nausicaa and the Cyclops is odd, because she is a princess, and he is a cannibal. However, their pairing is significant since they reveal a clear picture of the relation between the monstrous Sweeney and the lady, who is his innocent victim. It suggests that heterosexual relations are like the union of a beast and an innocent woman. But even in drawing a comparison between Sweeney and Odysseus, the two men are worlds apart.

The description of Sweeney by his physical parts might be read as a form of dehumanization. In her commentary on the line “Morning stirs the feet and hands”, the critic Marja Palmer suggests that “It is not only a kind of fragmentation, but also dehumanization.”⁴ In her commentary on the Sweeney poems, Nancy Hargrove, whose view collides head on with that of Palmer, states that “one of Eliot’s favorite devices [...] the use of bodily parts (rather than the whole) to suggest not only the physicality but also the fragmentation and dehumanization of modern man.”⁵ Sweeney’s self is shattered because he is destitute of the spiritual side, and this renders him a one-dimensional man. Seemingly, the boundary between the human and the animal becomes frail in “Sweeney Erect”. Sweeney cannot be civilized unless he strips the animal side, which is physicality, from himself. The dehumanization of Sweeney is reinforced by describing Sweeney’s gesture of rising from bed to that of an animal, namely an orang-outang. The latter is an ape-man or, according to the dictionary, “a large ape (an animal like a large monkey with no tail) with long arms and reddish hair”⁶ Some naturalist philosophers believe that the orang-outag was the ancestral form 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. Commenting on the description of Sweeney’s fragmented body, Palmer states that “this fragmentation of the body reflects Darwinian evolution in a concentrated form: hands-feet-spine-standing up, from “Orang-outang” to man. Sweeney illustrates man’s descent from animal creature to human being. And he lends a disastrous twist to Darwin’s notion of the “survival of the fittest”.”(Palmer_116) Sweeney’s gesture of an Orang-outang, which suggests his animalism, recalls to mind Edgar Allen Poe’s story “Murder in the Rue Morgue.” In writing the poem, Eliot might have had Poe’s story in mind. Discussing the influence of Poe, Eliot, in a 1948 lecture, writes: “[O]ne cannot be sure that one’s own writing has not been influenced by Poe [...] Some of his tales have had an important influence upon authors, and in types of writing where such influence would hardly be expected.”⁷ The influence of Poe in the poem is clear in the reference to the Orang-Outang and the shrieking woman in the 8th stanza. Poe’s story, to which Eliot alludes, revolves around a murder committed by an orang-outang. The invocation of this story is to equate sexual violence with committing murder. This is reinforced by employing violent images of weapons like “slit”, “gash”, “sickle”, “jackknives”, “claw”.

Sweeney’s perfervid desire for the lady is reft of true sentimentalism. She is seen as a mere object, which serves to quench his awful whims and then discarded. This woman is not just nameless; in almost the whole poem, she is presented without pronouns. Sweeney’s woman displays an attitude of indifference towards the affair. Love, for her, is mechanical. She is an automaton, and this is emphasized by the “sheets in the steam”, which evoke the steam engine. The relationship between Sweeney and the lady is automatic, senseless, and devoid of genuine love. This relation is confined to the physical aspects of love. In the whole poem, there are only fragmented parts of Sweeney’s body, and the only object of the house, which is described, is the bed. The critic John Perryman states that “Sweeney is a type of the un-romanticised natural man: flawed, earthly, and oblivious to class distinctions and bourgeois morality. He provides a strong contrast with those who are obsessed with the trappings of respectability but who are unwilling either to exercise the restraint or to make the sacrifices that respectability requires.”⁸ Sweeney not just lacks a mind to think, but a heart to

beat the knocks of conscience. He turns his back to morality, hence sinking into a state of savagery and moral degradation.

Characters, in the poem, whose title evokes sexual morbidity, are mere bodies. In “Sweeney Erect”, Sweeney is an oversexual dynamo, who makes predatory relationships with women, and he finds it impossible to resist the urge of sexual violence. Feeling is very excessive in “Sweeney” to the extent of savagery. Sweeney is too daring, and he has no sense of shyness. In the whole poem, he does not speak: he rather lets his actions speak about him.

Sweeney’s desire is animalistic. This animality is reinforced by his animal-like attributes. Even in his appearance, Sweeney is a beast, half man, half animal. He is an orang-outang; i.e. a large anthropoid ape, but at the same time, he is erect, i.e. he walks upright. In an era marked by the beginning of the deconstruction and blurring of binaries like male/female, there is also a concomitant deconstruction of the polarity human/animal. According to Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “becoming-animal is only one becoming among others.”⁹ Becoming-animal emphasizes the flexibility of identity, which is always in the process of becoming. The individual may either evolve into a civilized subject or degenerate into a primitive savage. Sweeney’s animality is due to the fact that his sole aim is to quench his carnal desire. Deleuze and Guattari maintain that sexuality deteriorates the individual, because it results in “the becoming-woman of the man and the becoming-animal of the human.” (*A Thousand* 307) René Girard, who shares the same view that bestiality brings a human/animal conflation, states that “The crime of bestiality [...] engenders monstrous mixtures of men and animals.” (*The Scapegoat* 34) Sexuality returns man to an early inferior stage of evolution. So, Sweeney’s fervid sexual desire results in his primitivism and savagery. This savagery is reinforced by alluding to Ariadne’s deserted island and Polyphemus’s cave, which suggest uncivilization. In the poem, sexual relations are ugly and disgusting. Hence, Sweeney is seen as an abject, not a human being but an animal. Eliot is like Francis Bacon, who depersonalizes and dehumanizes his subjects by distorting their faces and representing them as mere flesh. Hence, he renders them more akin to animals than to human beings. According to Deleuze, Bacon’s paintings establish “a zone of the indiscernible, of the undecidable between man and animal”¹⁰

The existence of tools like the jackknives suggests a crime about to be committed. This crime, which is sexual, is the violation of a female’s body. Sweeney’s sensual and cruel impulses are demonstrated in his way of moving from the bed, which is like “the jackknives upward at the knees”(44) The line suggests his violence, and it conjures up an image of a wild animal ready to tear the body of its victim to pieces. The equation of sexual violence with cannibalism is reinforced by alluding to Polyphemus. In her commentary on the interrelatedness of sexuality and madness, Jewel Spears Brooker posits that

The association of sexuality with violence, and of both with madness [...] is not unusual, especially in creative writers. In fact, it is made repeatedly in the work of two of Eliot’s favorite writers, Dostoevsky and Baudelaire. Their work is a reminder of how close sexual activity is to violence and to

madness, and of how in the minds of many people, one of the thrills of sex is its proximity to violence.¹¹

Though Eliot was a voracious reader of Doestovsky and Baudelaire, whose works depict the close vicinity of sex to violence and madness, the recurrence of this theme in his poems emanates mainly from his own vision of sexuality. Sweeney's engagement in copulation, which is frankly described in stanzas 3-5, is a means to vent his mad sexual urges. In his reading of the lines "“sickle motion from the thighs / Jackknives upward,”(44) Russell Elliott Murphy suggests that it is an “image of Sweeney getting up out of bed, but again suggestive of a male becoming sexually aroused as well.”¹² Murphy's interpretation is cogent since the knife is a metaphor for penis and penetration. Man's violence against women is, traditionally, an emblem of their masculinity and virility. It attests to male mastery and female submission. Thus, Sweeney's and the lady's heterosexual relations are bound up with power, violence, and mastery. Carpentier maintains that “Like the myth of Perseus, “Sweeney Erect” celebrates a grandiose phallic triumph.”(Carpentier 32) In fact, Sweeney's standing upright, after the affair, might signal his masculine power. According to Simone de Beauvoir, “It is not only a subjective and fleeting pleasure that man seeks in the sexual act. He wishes to conquer, to take, to possess.”¹³ The woman succumbs to the traditional patriarchal sexual rule in which women submit, without hesitation and resistance, to male power. She, then, helplessly responds, in self-defence, by “Pushing the framework of the bed/And clawing at the pillow slip”(44) Sweeney's “sickle motion” indicates a kind of primitive life. The sickle, which is a harmful tool also suggests Sweeney's sexual violence and his merciless treatment of the feminine. He is a devouring monster about to devour its victim, who is supposed to be the object of his desire. The use of the jackknife to describe copulation suggests that sexual violence is similar to murder and butchering. The woman is a piece of meat about to be dismembered and cannibalized. According to the feminist critic Carol J. Adams, “if you are a piece of meat, you are subject to a knife, to implemental violence.”¹⁴ Sweeney's sordid act conjures up an image of butchering an animal. Women, in the patriarchal myth, are treated the same way as animals. In this regard, Adams maintains that “The image of butchered animals haunted those who investigated the crimes. Women's fate became that traditionally reserved for animals.”(Adams 85) According to Adams, the essential components of metaphorical sexual butchering are: “The knife, real or metaphorical, as the chosen implement. The aggressor seeking to control/consume/defile the body of the victim. The fetishism of body parts” (Adams 88) All these components are present in “Sweeney Erect”. Girard, who also views sex as interrelated with violence, states: “Sex and violence frequently come to grips in such direct forms as abduction, rape, defloration, and various sadistic practices, as well as in indirect actions of indefinite consequences.”¹⁵

Sweeney's act of sexual desire is prompted not just by desire but also by fear of the female, which impels him to assume mastery over her. According to Carpentier, “both Sweeney's and Theseus's misogyny, which appear to victimize women, reveal a repulsion from female sexuality that has desire and fear at its root. It implies, not female helplessness, but rather female omnipotence in the male psyche.”¹⁶ It is possible to think that Sweeney's fear of sexuality mutates into aggression. His upright standing, after the tawdry relation, signals his overcoming of his irrepressible anxieties and fears of the woman, who is

associated with the Original Sin. Sweeney's posture, after the sordid act, might be interpreted as an escape from the woman's bestial desire, which is demeaning. Hence, it signals his transcendence of the feminine's degrading sensuality. Borrowing from the theory of Oedipus complex, Carpentier states that

Sweeney stands 'upright' after devastating the virgin/prostitute because man cannot be "civilized" until he has symbolically killed the lover/mother, and thereby extirpated his own "original sin" his repressed incestuous desire. Thus, both Sweeney and his avatar Theseus are valiant misogynists who defeat the engulfing mother and escape the ambivalent oedipal desire and terror she arouses. (Carpentier 28)

Sweeney's "upright" movement, after the affair, indicates his evolution from a savage/primitive to a civilized man, because at the beginning, he was like an ape or an orang-outang. But Sweeney seems to be too primitive to grasp what it means to be a civilized man. It seems that during the copulation act, he was an animal. His shaving, after the sexual encounter, conjures up an image of an animal attempting to shroud his masculine savagery with civilized manners. In fact, Sweeney is indifferent to the sin he committed. His knowledge of "the female temperament" suggests his familiarity and expertise in the sordid business, which becomes a routine for him. Sweeney is devoid of any sense of commitment or responsibility, because behind him, there lurks a human animal. His sordid act renders him a savage. So, after the encounter with the lady, he wipes the "suds around his face." (44) The act of shaving, after the affair, is probably a ritual to purify and cleanse himself. It also, symbolically, indicates his attempts to evolve from an animal to a human being, because sexuality is equated with animality. Carpentier interprets Sweeney's acts, after the encounter with the lady, as attempts to evolve to maturity and to acquire masculine vigor. In Carpentier's words, "the image of Sweeney "Broad-bottomed, pink from nape to base" suggests the shaving babe as well as the shaving ape. Thus it expresses the paradigm of man's dual infantilism and yearning for adulthood, his fear of impotence and longing for phallic power." (Carpentier 32)

Sexual violence results in a mayhem and turbulence in the lady's mind, which is interpreted differently by Sweeney and the ladies in the room. After the torrid affair, the lady becomes epileptic. Epilepsy is a disorder of the nervous system, which makes a person lose consciousness. It is often associated with a violent movement of the body. The lady seems to be like an animal trapped in a cage; hence, she behaves wildly. The fact that copulation results in the woman's epilepsy indicates the passivity with which she reacts to the act, but it also implies that copulation brings no enjoyment; it is akin to violence, which weakens its victim. Epilepsy might be interpreted as a state of Nausea felt by the woman after the act. Thus, sexual intercourse is forced, joyless and automatic. In his reading of the woman's epilepsy and contrary to most critics, James Miller takes "the word "epileptic" as metaphoric: this is her sexual reaction to the copulation with Sweeney, perhaps delayed but no less delirious."¹⁷ Whether it is hysteria or epilepsy, the woman's state, after the affair, indicates the interconnection between sexuality and madness. According to Girard, "Sex is at the origin of various illnesses, real or imaginary." (Violence 38) In accordance with Eliot's mythical method, "the epileptic on bed", is the modern counterpart of the hysterical Ariadne and

Aspatia. All of these stories reveal the tragic end of desire. The story of Sweeney and the whore reenacts ancient stories of lust and aggression. The woman's knotted hair recalls to mind the tangles of Ariadne's hair. Sweeney does not have any genuine love for the lady; he just wants to gratify his carnal desire. His sexual assaults are as misogynistic as the story of Ariadne to which Eliot alludes.

Like Theseus, who abandons Ariadne, Sweeney abandons the lady after quenching his animalistic urges. They are both feckless, deceiving and unfaithful. In heterosexual encounters, in Eliot's early poems, the woman is always victimized at least by being deserted and abandoned. Sweeney's testing of the "razor on his leg", after the affair, is reminiscent of Edgar Allen Poe's orang-outang. In Poe's "Murder in the Rue Morgue", the Orang-Outang takes his master's razor. He confronts a mirror, he lathers his own face, and he attempts to shave. The shriek of the lady also brings to mind the shrieking woman in Poe's story. In this story, a woman was killed by an Orang-Outang, and in the moment of the crime, a shrieking was heard. The reference to Poe's story is meant to draw a parallel between murder and sexuality. That is, rape is akin to the crime of murder. Like Sweeney, the woman seems to be an animal, deprived of the innate capacity to speak and keep her virtue in the face of temptation. She does not have any sense of grace or dignity. The lady's hysteria is dissimilar to that of Aspatia, which was out of grief and love. Sweeney and the lady are sexually bestial and blind to morality. In fact, they are sexual engines. After the dirty act, he waits until "the shriek subsides", which suggests his familiarity with the immoral act. The mating of Sweeney and the lady is sterile. This sterility is in sharp contrast with the traditional true love, which used to bring fertility and regeneration. In this regard, the critic D.E.S. Maxwell posits that "The reference to Ariadne is the first key to the poem's theme. She is the goddess of vegetation, personification of Spring and returning life, symbol of fertility."¹⁸ The allusion to Ariadne, the goddess of fertility, is to emphasise the sterility of erotic love in the case of Sweeney and his female companion.

Mrs. Turner is not really offended by the sordid affair that took place in the house, which is probably a brothel. She was afraid the grunting animal, i.e. Sweeney's woman, will smear the reputation of the house. In fact, the brothel "intimates the masculine view of sexuality; it is a house filled with women whose only job is to await and satisfy male desire."¹⁹ Concerned with the house's infamy, she comments that the affair "does the house no good"(45)The house, here, might also be a euphemism for the body. Women do not have any moral register to feel their sexual abuse. They consider sexual violence as a matter of taste; "The ladies of the corridor/Find themselves involved, disgraced/Call witness to their principles/And deprecate the lack of taste."⁽⁴⁵⁾The fact that the ladies in the house find themselves involved implies that Sweeney's woman represents all the women, who might have experienced the same kind of violence.

Sweeney is the antithesis of Eliot's family's puritanical norms. His immoral behavior emanate from the absence of a source of morality, which renders him very similar to animals than to human beings. Therein lies the importance of Eliot's reference to Emerson. In his subtle criticism of Emerson's idea of autonomy, Eliot recalls the following line: "The lengthened shadow of a man/is history, said Emerson/Who had not seen the silhouette/Of

Sweeney straddled in the sun.”(44) Emerson, who believes in the infinite capacities of the individual, insists on the idea of self-reliance. He distrusts the society and all the institutions including religion. For him, the individual should not adhere to an external authority, like the society or an institution, as a model to imitate. He should rather search for the truth and greatness within himself. Emerson’s transcendental self-reliance becomes individualism in its extreme. It means selfishness, social, and emotional disengagement. This individualism is exemplified by Sweeney’s act of shaving, while the woman suffers from an epileptic fit in bed. Eliot criticizes Emerson’s view, because human beings are never independent. For him, Sweeney is not the kind of man that can make a great civilization like Caesar or Christ. He is the antithesis of Emerson’s model of man.

Emerson’s idea of self-reliance is in sharp contrast with Eliot’s theories of classicism and tradition, because the former’s philosophy requires non-conformity to rituals, religion, and tradition. In his critical essays, Eliot insists on the importance of the individual’s adherence to an external authority, outside himself, like religion and tradition, because they are likely to appease the person’s extravagant desires, which are pernicious. Emerson’s philosophy, unlike that of Darwin, ignores the physical/animal side of human nature. Eliot criticizes the view of divorcing religion from culture. This, according to him, is likely to “leave Religion to be laid waste by the anarchy of feeling.”²⁰ In his comment on Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, Eliot states that “the love of man and woman (or far that matter of man and man) is only explained and made measurable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals.”²¹ Eliot criticizes the Romantics, who write extensively about Romantic love between man and woman. For him, love without religion is akin to the coupling of animals. It is animalistic and morbid because it is devoid of the spiritual side.

Conclusion

One of the important functions myths might serve is to deter man from breaking away from the patriarchal tradition. He makes use of Greek myths, which involve sexual violence and misogyny, to make of them a universal reality. Indeed, patriarchy, in “Sweeney Erect”, is shrouded in mythology. In the poem, there is a sense that these characters are destitute of a spiritual and intellectual side. That is, their two natural halves, the sensuous and the intellectual/spiritual, are torn apart. In this ribald poem, sexuality is thought to engender savagery. It is conglomerated with non-humanity. Eliot expresses the horror of becoming a mere sexual engine, in which the human being becomes very similar to an animal. Characters, in “Sweeney Erect”, are leading an animalistic and bestial existence. In other words, there is a blurring of the distinction between the human and the animal in the modern age which is characterized by secularism and spiritual sterility.

Endnotes

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- ³ René Girard, The Scapegoat, Trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986):34.
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- ⁵ Nancy D. Hargrove, "The Symbolism of Sweeney in the Works of T. S. Eliot", Critical Essays on T.S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif, Ed. Kinley E. Roby (Boston: G.K. Hall& Co, 1985):151.
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- ⁸ John Perryman, "Back to the Bay Psalm Book: T. S. Eliot's Identity Crisis and "Sweeney Erect". The Midwest Quarterly, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Spring, 2006):259.
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- ¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation (London: Continuum, 2003):21.
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