



Photograph from Gary Wayne Gilbert, *Buile Suibhne*, 2010

The Death and Ghost of “Sweeney”:

An Analysis of Limitations of Modernist Verse Drama through T. S. Eliot’s Sweeney Motif

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Abstract

In this paper, I unite scholarly understanding of T. S. Eliot's recurring character, Sweeney. I present the origin of Sweeney through Eliot's knowledge of classical and Irish myth as well as his contemporary views surrounding Ireland, Catholicism, Africa, and Afro-modernism. In discussing dramatic Sweeney, I incorporate an understanding of Eliot's contemporary works on Senecan tragedy to unravel the fragmented nature of "Sweeney Agonistes." I conclude my first chapter by discussing Sweeney's "death" by analyzing Eliot's recent conversion to Anglicanism and emerging views of poetic metaphysics.

My second chapter unveils the ghost of Sweeney in Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral" through the metaphor of stencil art, discussing "Sweeney Agonistes" as an outline. Further, I find Sweeney's ghost in the work of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting For Godot" through analysis of themes drawn from an article by Rick De Villier, as well as new studies on technique and characters. I conclude with my explanation of Sweeney as a "new" Senecan Tragic Hero based on the terminology of *semper idem* - always the same.

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Chapter 1: The Death of Sweeney

Introduction: When Eliot Wrote Sweeney

As soon as he was made to live, Sweeney was prophesied to die. As James Davidson writes, Sweeney's connection with Agamemnon through the epigraph in "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" (1918) correlates his fate with that of the Greek king, to die at the hands of a woman.¹ Related to another fated Sweeney in the 12th-century Irish myth *Buile Suibhne*, Eliot's character is again foreshadowed to meet his end at the hands of a spear.² Despite these allusions, Sweeney's death is not featured explicitly in any of T. S. Eliot's later poetic works, including "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" (1918), "Sweeney Erect" (1919), and "The Waste Land" (1922). After becoming a full British Citizen in 1927, Eliot transitioned from writing poetry to verse dramas.³ His first verse drama, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," was published in London by Faber and Faber in 1932 and is the last appearance of his character, "Sweeney."⁴

In the years preceding Eliot's transition to verse drama in 1927, he crafted his most successful scholarship of the works of ancient dramatists, Shakespeare, Dryden, and Rostand, and his essays "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation" and "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca."⁵ In the opening of his essay, "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation," T. S. Eliot describes Seneca as a tragedian who "deserves all the censure" ascribed to him by modern classicists but

¹ James Davidson, "The End of Sweeney," *College English* 27, no. 5 (1966): pg 400, <https://doi.org/10.2307/373262>. accessed Nov 13, 2023.

² See the introduction of O'Keefe, J. G., and Joseph Falaky Nagy. *Buile Suibhne : (The Frenzy of Suibhne) : Being the Adventures of Suibhne Geilt : a Middle Irish Romance*. London: Irish Texts Society, 1996, pg xi.

³ Stephen Spender, *T. S. Eliot*, New York: Viking Press, 1976, pg. xii

⁴ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama." In *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, pg 135-54, London: Faber, 1974.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays, 1917-1932*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014, pg. 13-440.

makes a distinguishable pushback against them by illuminating Seneca's impact on the development of modern verse drama.⁶

“In the Renaissance, no Latin author was more highly esteemed than Seneca; in modern times, few Latin authors have been more consistently damned.”⁷

Eliot's “Seneca in Elizabethan Drama” showcases the revolutionary techniques that Seneca brought to the world of theater, particularly aspects of Shakespeare's plays that we now revere.⁸ Eliot explains how Seneca pioneers emotionally charged declamatory speech, which we now refer to as the soliloquy, as well as providing instances of gore and death on stage.⁹ Lastly, Eliot contends, “the five-act division of the modern European play is due to Seneca.”¹⁰

Regarded as some of the best critical essays on the impact of Senecan tragedy, T. S. Eliot offers a new way to understand the impact of Seneca, looking beyond his stoic philosophy and at his artistry.¹¹ In the field of Classical Modernism, T. S. Eliot remains a prominent figure.¹² Classical texts became not a way to tie him to tradition but a way for him to make new ones. T. S. Eliot's “Sweeney Agonistes” reflects elements of Senecan tragedy that he was undoubtedly familiar with, not to tie him to classical tradition but to invert narrative style and contemporary themes and ideas.

It is no surprise that after Eliot's scholarship on modern verse drama, he decided to begin writing them himself. However, Joe Cleary argues in his book, *World Modernism and Empire*,

⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 81.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 80.

⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 95.

⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 81-97.

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 97.

¹¹ See T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 81-97.

¹² For more discussion of Classical Modernism, see Leah Culligan Flack, *James Joyce and Classical Modernism*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021; For T. S. Eliot and Classical modernism, and see Louis Menand, “T. S. Eliot and Modernity,” *The New England Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (1996): 554–79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/366554>.

that Eliot's move to London has a significant role in his era of literary career.¹³ Cleary argues that London was the old literary capital in a world of Modernist writers thriving in Paris and America.¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, leaving the poetry of the American modernist behind him, decided not only to make his move to England permanent but to take up the medium of England's most famous Renaissance writer, Shakespeare. The impact of Eliot's move to the old capital can be seen in comparison to his contemporary, James Joyce: at the same time as Joyce was writing his most exploratory novel, *Finnegan's Wake*, Eliot turned back to the tradition of Shakespeare and Senecan Tragedy.

The year Eliot transitioned to verse drama saw significant changes in his character. For one, Eliot's return to The Church of England marks an important distinction between his American and London years.¹⁵ Troubles with his first wife, Vivienne, culminate in London in 1933, when he makes a formal separation from her.¹⁶ Along with his change in lifestyle came his decision to leave behind poetry to move forward into the realm of verse drama.

Eliot's first attempt in verse drama, "Sweeney Agonistes," was a failure in that it remains incomplete. In the first publication of the Sweeney fragments, it is mentioned that "the author wishes to point out that 'Sweeney Agonistes' is not a one-act play and was never designed as such" and that the author "has abandoned any intention of completing them."¹⁷ The play we

¹³ Joe Cleary, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* (2021) pg 32; See Cleary's introduction for more on the Modernist expatriate.

¹⁴ Joe Cleary, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* (2021), pg 32.

¹⁵ Stephen Spender, *T. S. Eliot*, pg. xii

¹⁶ "Biography: T. S. Eliot," *English Literature: Victorians and Moderns*, Lumen Learning, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-englishlitvictorianmodern/chapter/biography-23/>, accessed December 17, 2023; For information on Vivienne Eliot and "Sweeney Agonistes," see Eliot, T. S., Valerie Eliot, and John Haffenden, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. 6, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016, pg. 540.

¹⁷ Kinley E. Roby, *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall, 1985, pg 21.

know today exists in fragments, “Fragments of a Prologue” and “Fragments of Agon.”¹⁸

Following his failure, Marjorie Lightfoot writes that Eliot’s struggle with completing “Sweeney Agonistes” forever altered his stylistic choices in his future dramas:

“T. S. Eliot’s Initial Choice of Conventions of Music Hall Comedy ‘Sweeney Agonistes’ was largely abandoned in the course of his career as a dramatist.”¹⁹

E. Martin Browne argues that Eliot’s “change of climate,” specifically his religious conversion, was the reason for his content change, which affected the genre of his dramas.²⁰ However, Lightfoot pushes back against this reductive conjecture, stating that Eliot’s fundamental understanding of the purpose of verse drama had changed from emphasizing its difference from “naturalistic prose” to appropriating modern speech so that the audience would not be conscious of the drama’s “verse.”²¹ In Eliot’s later dramas, “The Cocktail Party,” “Confidential Clerk,” and “Elder Statesmen,” Eliot loses the antique and renaissance conventions of drama that he seemed concerned with in writing “Sweeney Agonistes”: the “chorus, caricature, soliloquy, lyric duets, elevated rhetoric, and formal ritual.”²²

More surprising is the relationship between Eliot’s “self-correction” in technique and his essay, “Seneca and Elizabethan Translation.”²³ One of the many aspects of Senecan tragedy that Eliot praises is Seneca’s “drama of words.”²⁴ What classical scholars hailed as one-dimensional and boring, Eliot praised: Seneca’s long chorus, soliloquy, and stichomythic dialogues for their

¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 135-54. London: Faber, 1974.

¹⁹ Marjorie J Lightfoot, “Charting Eliot’s Course in Drama,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 20, no. 2 (1968): pg.188. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3204902>, accessed April 1, 2024.

²⁰ Browne, E. Martin “T. S. Eliot in the Theatre,” T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work, ed. Allen Tate (New York, 1966), pg 118

²¹ Marjorie J Lightfoot, “Charting Eliot’s Course in Drama,” pg 188.

²² Marjorie J Lightfoot, “Charting Eliot’s Course in Drama,” pg 188.

²³ Marjorie J Lightfoot, “Charting Eliot’s Course in Drama,” pg 188.

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg 83.

poetry, the movement of the plot not in setting, but in words.²⁵ Similarly, he praises Shakespearean drama and later Italian opera for the trailing sequences where words move the plot quicker than onstage action.²⁶ Of course, he commended Seneca, Shakespeare, and the Operas for their use of gore and dramatic death scenes on stage, but did so as a supplement to the relatively static speaking scenes.²⁷ Lightfoot's analysis of Eliot's transition from older conventions of drama contradicts Eliot's arguments in support of traditional Senecan and Shakespearean drama in his essays.

What could have caused this intellectual transition? To examine Eliot's later dramas it is necessary to unravel Eliot's experiment, "Sweeney Agonistes," and why it was left a fragment. In this essay, I argue that Eliot's struggle with completing "Sweeney Agonistes" and his abandonment of his character, Sweeney, represents his toil with combining modernist themes and form with his desire for tradition.



Illustration by Francis Bacon, *Sweeney Agonistes*, 1967

²⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg 83.

²⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg 97.

²⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg 97.

Eliot and Myth

Since his inception, Sweeney has been associated with mythological figures of classical antiquity. In Eliot's first portrayal of Sweeney in "Sweeney among the Nightingales," Eliot includes allusions to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* to create a sense of "foreboding" in the poem.²⁸ In the following year, 1918, in his "Sweeney Erect," David Ward makes the argument for Eliot's allusion to the classical hero, Theseus, or at least, a farcical version of the hero through the image of a woman weaving the story of Ariadne.²⁹ Sweeney in "Sweeney Erect" is akin to Theseus in his desertion of a woman, hence the reference to Theseus and Ariadne.³⁰ Eliot's mention of Nausica and Polyphemus, although these characters are more menacing than Ariadne, work similarly to Ariadne's allusion as both are deserted on Islands by the Greek hero Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*.³¹ The themes of escape, abandonment, and a sense of foreboding are integral to Sweeney's classical allusions but are also embedded in Sweeney's Irish origins.

There has been much scholarly debate about the origin of Eliot's Sweeney. Nominally, Eliot's character has been connected to the character Mad Sweeney of *Buile Suibhne*, The Frenzy of Sweeney, of the 12th-Century Irish myth.³² *Buile Suibhne* was republished in an English

²⁸ James Davidson, "The End of Sweeney," pg 400.

²⁹ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, pg 37.

³⁰ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 37.

³¹ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 36.

³² Dennell M. Downum, "Apeneck Sweeney's Penitential Path," *Yeats Eliot Review* 26, no. 1 (2009): 2+. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A216270470/LitRC?u=mlln_m_bostcoll&sid=googleScholar&xid=98f5aa6d, accessed December 10, 2023.

Translation in 1913 by J.G. O'Keeffe.³³ Eliot was sure to come across this translation in London when he first arrived in 1914.³⁴ Although the story originally appealed to younger audiences, Eliot's fascination with classical myth, and mythology in general, would make it so that he would have been a likely reader of this Irish Folktale.³⁵

The story of *Buile Suibhne* is also a modernist haven, taken up as inspiration by numerous writers of the modern and postmodern era, such as Austin Clarke, Flann O'Brien, and Seamus Heaney, possibly in the same way classical mythology had a rise in these years.³⁶ Sweeney's myth contains some traditional classical elements: Sweeney is Ovidian, a story with an epic transformation and resolution of fate.³⁷ Sweeney suffers a classical *peripeteia*, in an Icarus-like resolution, where Sweeney's madness creates his conflict, and an extreme reversal of fate resolves it.³⁸

The story of Mad Sweeney, a minor king, begins when he sees a cleric setting up a church in his woods and assaults him.³⁹ The cleric, Ronan Finn, decides to curse Sweeney so that one day he will be caught fleeing in the woods stark naked and will be felled by a spear.⁴⁰

³³ Dennell M. Downum, "Apeneck Sweeney's Penitential Path."

³⁴ Dennell M. Downum, "Apeneck Sweeney's Penitential Path."

³⁵ Dennell M. Downum, "Apeneck Sweeney's Penitential Path."

³⁶ Dennell M. Downum, "Apeneck Sweeney's Penitential Path."

³⁷ For more on Ovid's transformations and themes of fate and free will, see Alessandro Barchiesi, 'Reading Metamorphosis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*', in Alison Sharrock, Daniel Möller, and Mats Malm (eds), *Metamorphic Readings: Transformation, Language, and Gender in the Interpretation of Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Oxford, 2020; online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Aug. 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198864066.003.0002>, accessed 31 Mar. 2024.

³⁸ For more information on Sweeney as a character of antiquity, see Herbert Knust, "Sweeney Among the Birds and Brutes," *arcadia* 2, no. 1-3 (1967): pg. 207, <https://doi.org/10.1515/arca.1967.2.1-3.204>, accessed March 31, 2024; To see the summary of the myth *Buile Suibhne*, read the introduction of J. G. O'Keefe and Joseph Falaky Nagy. *Buile Suibhne*.

³⁹ To see the summary of the myth *Buile Suibhne*, read the introduction of J. G. O'Keefe and Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Buile Suibhne*, pg. xi.

⁴⁰ J. G. O'Keefe and Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Buile Suibhne*, pg. xi.

Sweeney then goes to fight in the battle of *Mag Rath*. When receiving a warrior's blessing from a priest and Ronan, Sweeney fells the priest with the spear and attempts to hit Ronan as well.⁴¹ Ronan again curses Sweeney so that amid the next round of battles, Sweeney feels intense fear and flees into the woods, abandoning his kingdom.⁴² Sweeney continues to wander throughout Ireland as a part-man and part-bird creature and is subsequently killed out of the sky with a spear.⁴³

Irish authors have rewritten *Buile Suibhne* since its inception, but the origins of the myth remain obscure.⁴⁴ Sources have often agreed that the battle of *Mag Rath* occurred in the 7th century, but in the tellings of that battle, there is no mention of Sweeney's mad flight.⁴⁵ M. Formin argues that Sweeney's popularity arises from him as the best representation of the "Celtic wild man," whose intimate relationship with the animals of Ireland holds a unifying cultural identity of the early Irish people.⁴⁶ Sweeney's character later becomes associated with Christian sainthood, specifically the stories of St. Ronan and St. Moling, which allow his myth to endure in a religious context.⁴⁷

In his article, "Sweeney Among the Birds and Brutes," Herbert Knust argues that Eliot's Sweeney is connected intimately to *Buile Suibhne*, as Eliot's bird and swine motif surround Sweeney in his poetry.⁴⁸ Most central to Eliot's reference to *Buile Suibhne* is the motif of escape.

⁴¹ J. G. O'Keefe and Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Buile Suibhne*, pg. xi.

⁴² J. G. O'Keefe and Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Buile Suibhne*, pg. xi.

⁴³ J. G. O'Keefe and Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Buile Suibhne*, pg xi.

⁴⁴ M. Fomin, "Three Studies of Buile Suibhne: Perspectives and Reassessments," *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, 64(1), pg. 443. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zcph-2017-0010>, accessed March 31, 2024.

⁴⁵ M. Fomin, "Three Studies of Buile Suibhne: Perspectives and Reassessments," pg 443.

⁴⁶ M. Fomin, "Three Studies of Buile Suibhne: Perspectives and Reassessments," pg 445.

⁴⁷ M. Fomin, "Three Studies of Buile Suibhne: Perspectives and Reassessments," pg 445.

⁴⁸ Herbert Knust, "Sweeney Among the Birds and Brutes" *arcadia* 2, no. 1-3 (1967): pg. 205, <https://doi.org/10.1515/arca.1967.2.1-3.204>, accessed March 31, 2024.

Eliot's Essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" written in 1917, showcases his preoccupation with poetic escape: "Poetry is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality."⁴⁹ In his book, "T. S. Eliot Between Two Worlds," David Ward draws a similar conclusion about Eliot's opinion of the role of art as drawn from Eliot's graduate thesis in 1916: in art, we are both "ourselves a subject, and ourselves an object."⁵⁰ Thus, Eliot believed that to understand our current world, we must create a second one, "personal doubling."⁵¹ Fascinating enough, *Buile Suibhne* both represents the idea of escape from oneself and personal doubling. *Buile Suibhne* is a "mirrored myth": Sweeney's actions of violence are reflected back to him as punishment.⁵² Further, the St. Ronan and St. Morig episodes are mirrored.⁵³ *Buile Suibhne* also embodies the escape from oneself, as Sweeney, the king, flees his kingdom and human form and transforms into a bird-like creature, free to observe his old world through new eyes.⁵⁴ In conjunction with Eliot's philosophies when he created his Sweeney, there is no doubt that the Irish myth *Buile Suibhne* was on his mind.

Sweeney, Africa, and the Irish:

Not only was Irish mythology at the forefront of Eliot's Sweeney, but the image of the 20th-century Irish Catholic was as well. Jonathan Morse, in his article, "Sweeney, the Sites of the Irish, and The Waste Land," connects Sweeney's depiction of "apeneck" as relating to the

⁴⁹ Kinley E. Roby, *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, pg 11.

⁵⁰ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 9

⁵¹ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 9

⁵² M. Fomin, "Three Studies of Buile Suibhne: Perspectives and Reassessments," pg 443.

⁵³ M. Fomin, "Three Studies of Buile Suibhne: Perspectives and Reassessments," pg 443.

⁵⁴ J. G. O'Keefe and Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Buile Suibhne*, pg xi.

sociological and historical context of New England anti-Irish prejudice, specifically Irish-american depiction by Thomas Nast:

“pug-nosed, beetle-browed, and unshaven, with tiny, deep-set eyes and a wide, lipless mouth full of pointed teeth. He is, in short, an ape.”⁵⁵

Downum continues Morse’s argument in his article, “Apeneck Sweeney’s Penitential Path,” that in the time of “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” Eliot is still attached to this stereotype, specifically that the Irish American, as Morse argues is seen as “less than human in humanity,” represents a “terrifying irruption of the Id.”⁵⁶ Thus, Eliot’s choice of “Sweeney” as the name of his titular character aligns with Morse’s idea that Eliot was conscious of the animalistic characteristics of Irish mythical figures.⁵⁷

Although I agree with Morse and Downum’s references to Nast, reading a Darwinian element of Sweeney's character is also compelling. Mara Degenera points out that Eliot's use of “orangutan” in “Sweeney Erect” is related to Darwin’s idea of the closest evolutionary relative to the modern human and his theory placing human origins in Africa.⁵⁸ In “Sweeney among the Nightingales,” Eliot does not simply attribute animalistic qualities to Sweeney, but those qualities of animals from the African Safari.

“Apeneck Sweeney spread his knees

⁵⁵ Jonathan Morse, “Sweeney, the Sites of the Irish, and The Waste Land,” In Kinley E. Roby’s *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall, 1985, pg 138; Dennell M. Downum, “Apeneck Sweeney's Penitential Path.”

⁵⁶ Jonathan Morse, “Sweeney, the Sites of the Irish, and The Waste Land,” pg 138; Dennell M. Downum, “Apeneck Sweeney's Penitential Path.”

⁵⁷ Jonathan Morse, “Sweeney, the Sites of the Irish, and The Waste Land,” pg 138; Dennell M. Downum, “Apeneck Sweeney's Penitential Path.”

⁵⁸ Mara De Gennaro, “Man is Man because: Humanism Wars, “Sweeney Erect”, and the Makings of the Modernist Imagination,” *Paideuma* 41 (2014): pg 181, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43908244>, accessed March 31, 2024; T. S. Eliot. “Sweeney Erect,” In *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*, by Thomas Stearns Eliot, 35, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980, pg. 25.

Letting his arms hang down to laugh,
 The zebra stripes along his jaw
 Swelling to maculate giraffe.”⁵⁹

Sweeney is compared to three African animals, the “ape,” “zebra” and “maculate giraffe.”⁶⁰ Not only is Sweeney bestial, but Africanized. Rober Flessiner draws a conclusive connection between Eliot’s relationship with Africa in his article “T. S. Eliot’s Appropriation of Black Culture,” which explains Eliot’s “specialized concern with African lore during his Harvard years.”⁶¹ All three animals represented exaggerated features, the ape notably closest to the human, but the giraffe and zebra both “striped” and “maculate” (spotted).⁶² Furthermore, Sweeney is given a broad appearance, “long arms” with a combination of a thick and short “ape-neck,” but his broadness extends to the image of the zebra and giraffe, whose spots and stripes are used to create optical illusions against their predators, creating indistinguishable borders between the ends of their body and the largeness around them.⁶³ Therefore, Eliot creates an illusion of Sweeney as threateningly large and barbarous but juxtaposes this description by relating him to prey.

Eliot names Sweeney once in “Sweeney Among the Nightingales”; however, he continues to refer to his character in a range of epithets and metonymies that represent his

⁵⁹ T. S. Eliot. “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” In *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*, by Thomas Stearns Eliot, 35, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980.

⁶⁰ T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” pg 35.

⁶¹ Robert F Fleissner, “T. S. Eliot's Appropriation of Black Culture: a Dialogical Analysis,” *CLA Journal* 46, no. 4 (2003): pg 513. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44325181>, accessed March 31, 2024.

⁶² T. S. Eliot. “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” pg 35.

⁶³ T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” pg 35; for more on Zebra and Giraffe, see “Facts about Giraffe & Zebra,” *Africa Trip*, 2024, <https://afrikatrip.de/facts-giraffe-zebra/>, accessed March 31, 2024.

animal-like appearance. Sweeney is first a “silent man” in “mocha brown,” which refers to the deep color of imported foods, chocolate, and coffee.⁶⁴ Sweeney’s silence is composed with a look of “sprawled” and “gaping,” emphasizing his incapacity for language and his long ape-like appearance.⁶⁵ Sweeney orders “oranges, banana figs, and hothouse grapes,” again, notably foreign fruits to this pub, reiterated by the mention of the grapes as “hothouse,” or greenhouse grown.⁶⁶ In the following stanza, Eliot makes Sweeney a “silent vertebrate in brown,” again incapable of speech and Darwinized by the categorization as a vertebrate.⁶⁷ In this stanza, Sweeney “contracts and concentrates, withdraws”, emphasizing his quiet, prey-like response to the prostitute “Rachel nee Rabinovitch,” whose “murderous paws” claw at the grapes that Sweeney had ordered to his table.⁶⁸

Eliot adds elements of Darwinism and images of the African safari to describe Sweeney’s appearance and nature, the same nature that Morse delineates as a prejudice towards Irish Americans. Eliot’s choice to include African images could be drawn from his affinity towards African culture, which he grew at Harvard, or born from an idea to conflate the stereotyped identity of the “Celtic wildman” and “uncivilized” African.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney among the Nightingales," pg 35.

⁶⁵ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney among the Nightingales," pg 35.

⁶⁶ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney among the Nightingales," pg 35.

⁶⁷ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney among the Nightingales," pg 35.

⁶⁸ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney among the Nightingales," pg 35; for more on “Rachel nee Rabinovitch” and Eliot’s Antisemitism, see A. M. Klein “T. S. Eliot and the Nobel Prize (1948),” In *Collected Works of A.M. Klein: Literary Essays and Reviews*, edited by Usher Caplan and M. W. Steinberg, pg 268–75. University of Toronto Press, 1987.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt1vxmdxr.76>, accessed March 31, 2024.

⁶⁹ For more on the “celtic wildman” see, M. Fomin, “Three Studies of Buile Suibhne: Perspectives and Reassessments,” pg 443; for more on “uncivilized,” see Fleissner, Robert F. *T. S. Eliot and the Heritage of Africa: The Magus and the Moor as Metaphor*. New York: P. Lang, 1992, pg 145.

In the context of “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” the creation of predator and prey expands upon Sweeney as the prey of the prostitutes and a confident escapee from them. Moreover, Sweeney again becomes an Agamemnon-like figure whose confidence leads him only to ignorance of his position, vulnerable to the women around him. At the end of “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” the women whispering the songs of Sweeney’s death confirm his end while leaving Sweeney in complete ignorance.⁷⁰ In “Sweeney Erect,” Sweeney too leaves the site of the prostitutes, but not as a prey.⁷¹ Sweeney’s apathy towards the epileptic, suffering “Ariadne” of the poem, although aligning him with the heroic Theseus, represents the consequences of his animalistic qualities - flesh without spirit.⁷²

Fleshy Sweeney

Eliot’s animalistic descriptions of Sweeney largely contribute to him as “fleshy” in his earlier works. As summarized by Kinley Roby, the emphasis on Sweeney’s physical appearance in “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” and in “Sweeney Erect,” his apathy towards the epileptic women, and his lack of speech in any of Eliot’s poems are indicative of his lack of “spirit” and the emphasis on his “flesh.”⁷³ Particularly illustrated in “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Night Service” is the fleshy image of Sweeney shifting “Ham to Ham” in the bath: stated by David Ward, the back of his legs simulate the flesh of a swine.⁷⁴ Moreso exaggerated in “Sweeney Erect” is Sweeney’s body as “pink from nape to base,” void of hair with emphasis on his “pink” flesh. In his book,

⁷⁰ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney among the Nightingales," pg 35.

⁷¹ T. S. Eliot. "Sweeney Erect," pg 25.

⁷² T. S. Eliot. "Sweeney Erect," pg 25.

⁷³ Kinley E. Roby, *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, pg 11.

⁷⁴ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 32.

“T. S. Eliot and the Heritage of Africa,” Robert F. Fleissner discusses Eliot’s interest in the works of Lucy Levin Brul, who makes a distinction between a man of “spirit,” the “civilized man” of Europe, and the man of “flesh,” the “uncivilized” African.⁷⁵ Eliot himself writes in his essay, “The Metaphysical Poets,” about the “dissociation of sensibilities”: that in becoming civilized, man is dissociated from the flesh.⁷⁶ Fleissner applies this philosophy to Prufrock in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, stating that the “human voices,” representative of civilization, that wake Prufrock are what take him from the flesh to the spiritual world.⁷⁷ To Eliot, Sweeney is not simply a man of flesh, but a man lacking “spirit” entirely.⁷⁸

Sweeney’s last appearance in poetry was in *The Waste Land* in 1922 before he was picked up again in 1927 for “Sweeney Agonistes.” The following year, Eliot wrote two essays on Babbitt, “The Humanism of Irving Babbitt ” and “Second Thought on Humanism,” where the discussion of spirit and flesh is again brought into an older Eliot.⁷⁹ Eliot criticizes Babbitt, More, and the humanists for offering an “alternative to religion” in humanism.⁸⁰ Babbitt believed that the world exists on two planes, that of the flesh and that of the spirit, and it is the job of the Humanist to bridge these worlds.⁸¹ More gives examples of Greek tragedians and bridging these worlds with mythology.⁸² Eliot, a recently converted Anglican, believes that “humanism” provides a temporary solution to what the Christian religion already asks of its followers - to

⁷⁵ Robert F. Fleissner, *T. S. Eliot and the Heritage of Africa: The Magus and the Moor as Metaphor*, pg 145.

⁷⁶ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 9.

⁷⁷ Robert F. Fleissner, *T. S. Eliot and the Heritage of Africa: The Magus and the Moor as Metaphor*, pg 147.

⁷⁸ Robert F. Fleissner, *T. S. Eliot and the Heritage of Africa: The Magus and the Moor as Metaphor*, pg 147.

⁷⁹ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 6.

⁸⁰ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 6.

⁸¹ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 7.

⁸² David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 7.

seek a profound spiritual connection from a fleshy body.⁸³ In the later chapter, I will discuss what Eliot's religiosity means for the "fleshy" Sweeney in "Sweeney Agonistes."

Jazz and Afro-modernism in "Sweeney Agonistes"

Eliot's earlier works with Sweeney, "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" and "Sweeney Erect," are both written in the form of the Ballad, which Eliot contributes in "The Music of Poetry" being in the rhythm of "Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Norman French, of Middle English and Scots [...], together with the rhythms of Latin, and, at various periods, of French, Italian, and Spanish."⁸⁴ To Eliot, the rhythm of the drama is different.

In Eliot's essay in 1920, "The Possibility of Poetic Drama," he writes that the modern drama should be a "form of entertainment" that we subject it to the "process which would leave it as a form of art."⁸⁵ Eliot claimed that the most essential piece missing from the modern drama is the rhythm, ever present in Ancient Tragedy through the beating of a "drum."⁸⁶ In the time of "Sweeney Agonistes," Eliot lived in the Jazz Age, where jazz music was the most popular form of musical entertainment. Thus, it is natural for Eliot to have incorporated the "throbbing rhythms" of jazz music as entertainment in his first attempt at writing drama.⁸⁷

As what Eliot calls a "Jazz Drama" - jazz is embedded in Sweeney Agonistes, as Balint Szele writes in "Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes," there are jazz songs,

⁸³ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 8.

⁸⁴ Bálint Szele, "Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes," *The AnaChronisT* 12 (January 1, 2006), pg 169, <https://doi.org/10.53720/fjif3660>, accessed March 31, 2024.

⁸⁵ David Edwards Jones, *The Plays of T. S. Eliot*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, pg 3.

⁸⁶ Bálint Szele, "Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes," pg 167.

⁸⁷ Bálint Szele, "Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes," pg 169.

there are technical terms connected with music (Tambo, Bones, diminuendo), all in organic unity with the texture of the play.”⁸⁸ Szele recognizes onomatopoeia as a type of jazz scat: “ting a ling, Hoo Haa, Knock Knock.”⁸⁹ Eliot also uses the jazz-style call-and-response repetition:⁹⁰

SWEENEY:I'll carry you off
 To a cannibal isle.
 DORIS: You'll be the cannibal!
 SWEENEY: You'll be the missionary!
 You'll be my little seven stone missionary!
 I'll gobble you up. I'll be the cannibal.
 DORIS: You'll carry me off? To a cannibal isle?
 SWEENEY: I'll be the cannibal.
 DORIS:I'll be the missionary.
 I'll convert you!⁹¹

In this fragment, Eliot's rhythm controls the function of the words: “Rhythm becomes an overall governing feature of the play – just like in jazz music, where the drums and the double bass provide the beat for the soloists.”⁹² More specifically, lines like “I'll be the cannibal” and “You'll carry me off” mimic each other in several stressed and unstressed syllables, displaying Eliot's desire to govern his language with rhythm.⁹³ However, the repetition lends the dialogue to fragmentary, which Eliot tries to resolve through line indents to create the illusion of complete thoughts. By indenting the “response” visually, Eliot creates one long sentence split up into two pieces of dialogue.

⁸⁸ For Eliot on the “Jazz Drama”, see Eliot, T. S., Valerie Eliot, and John Haffenden, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. 2, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016, pg. 192; Bálint Szele, “Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes,” pg 167.

⁸⁹ Bálint Szele, “Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes,” pg 167.

⁹⁰ Bálint Szele, “Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes,” pg 167.

⁹¹ T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 146.

⁹² Bálint Szele, “Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes,” pg 169.

⁹³ For more on Language and Repetition, see Bálint Szele, “Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes,” pg 169.

In his article, Balint Szele finds consistent drum beats in stressed and unstressed syllables.⁹⁴ Eliot's use of anaphora also creates a consistent "drum beat" throughout his lines:

"In a nice little, white little, soft little, tender little,
Juicy little, right little, missionary stew."⁹⁵

The repetition of "little" provides the backbone of this rhythmic line, as the reader understands that the combination of a single syllable word with little will always be read as a stressed followed by two unstressed syllables. This pattern continues so that regardless of the word's length, the word's first syllable preceding "little" will be stressed. Thus, the lines are read like:

x x X x x X x x X x x X x x x

"In a nice little, white little, soft little, tender little,
X x x x X x x X x x x X
Juicy little, right little, missionary stew."⁹⁶

The varying multi-syllable words combined with the steady rhythm of "little " create the illusion of jazz; as instruments in jazz bands can stray away from the rhythm, they are always brought back together by the steady sound of the snare drum.⁹⁷

Jazz is indisputably tied to black folk music and African American Culture, which Eliot recognizes in two of his characters, Swarts and Snow, "who very rarely speak in the course of the play, seem to be jazz-musicians, perhaps of African origin."⁹⁸ Furthermore, Craig Werner writes that "analysts" of Afro-modernism: "including Amiri Baraka, Eugene Redmond, Sherley Anne

⁹⁴ Bálint Szele, "Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes," pg 169.

⁹⁵ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 146.

⁹⁶ For technique on annotations of Eliot's syllables see, Bálint Szele, "Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes," pg 166; T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 146.

⁹⁷ For more on jazz and the snare drum, see "Drummer's Role," *Jazz Styles*, 2024, <https://jazzstyles.net/drummers-role/#:~:text=The%20sounds%20made%20by%20striking,while%20the%20band%20is%20playing>, accessed March 31, 2024.

⁹⁸ Bálint Szele, "Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes," pg 166.

Williams, and Houston Baker, would clearly agree with Henderson's assertion that black poetry 'derives its form from two basic sources,' Black speech and Black music."⁹⁹ Eliot in incorporating jazz music, is providing "entertainment" to his play, but is continuing his motif of Sweeney's tie to black culture. Sweeney in Eliot's poems is connected to Africa through safari imagery: to make him seem animalistic and "uncivilized."¹⁰⁰ Here, Eliot appropriates black music to make Sweeney entertaining. More appropriative and prejudiced is Eliot's drawn inspiration from the minstrel show in "Sweeney Agonistes" through the characters Tambo and Bones, names of two popular minstrel show characters.¹⁰¹

In writing drama, Eliot had begun to use different techniques to describe Sweeney than in his poetry. As Eliot could not provide his audience with a written description of Sweeney, he hid the black elements of Sweeney in the music, rhythm, and genre of his drama. However, there is no indication that Sweeney himself is black. The Sweeney in "Sweeney Agonistes" is radically different from Sweeney, the man in "mocha brown," in Eliot's poetry.¹⁰² Poetic Sweeney is voiceless and consistently "fleshy," whereas dramatic Sweeney is the voice of the plot, driving the conversations between the characters in the second scene. Dramatic Sweeney even explains, "I gotta use words to talk to you," emphasizing that he has to talk to explain his thoughts.¹⁰³

Applying afro-modernist Houston Baker's ideas of "Mastery of Form" and "Deformation of Mastery" provides a new reading of Eliot's changing Sweeney. Dramatic Sweeney represents

⁹⁹ Craig Werner, "Blues for T. S. Eliot and Langston Hughes: The Afro-Modernist Aesthetic of Harlem Gallery," *Black American Literature Forum* 24, no. 3 (1990): pg 455.

¹⁰⁰ Robert F. Fleissner, *T. S. Eliot and the Heritage of Africa: The Magus and the Moor as Metaphor*, pg 145.

¹⁰¹ Bálint Szele, "Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes," pg 166.

¹⁰² T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney among the Nightingales," pg 35.

¹⁰³ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 153.

an idea of “Mastery of Form,” which Baker explains through a metaphor of jazz: “anecdotally, one can imagine Paul Whiteman trying to sustain the title “King of Jazz” in the presence of Louis Armstrong.”¹⁰⁴ Eliot’s interpretation of jazz represents a “Mastery of Form,” as Sweeney, supposedly representative of an underclass and uneducated man, speaks in rhyme and verse with little representative dialectal language besides the occasional “gotta” or “gonna.”¹⁰⁵ Eliot attempts to start with what is popular, jazz music and music hall comedies, to draw in his audience, from which then he will produce “art.”¹⁰⁶ Eliot’s Sweeney does not come across as the popular unintellectual figure that Eliot supposed him to be, and Eliot’s utilization of jazz in a verse drama is much like “Paul Whiteman” trying to sustain the title of “the King of Jazz.”¹⁰⁷

Deformation of Mastery is explained by Baker through sound: “The deformative sounds of Afro-America are the group phonics and common language of the masses, sounds that are traditionally labeled “sub-standard,” “nonsensical,” or “unlearned” by white speakers.”¹⁰⁸ Baker provides the “gorilla” as an example of Deformation of Mastery: the gorilla’s noises appear violent and threatening because they cannot be understood.¹⁰⁹ I argue that “Deformation of Mastery” is ever present in Eliot’s Poetic Sweeney, who is often compared to an “ape” like figure and “orangutan.”¹¹⁰ Eliot’s poetic Sweeney does not produce any sound, merely appearances that are bestial and animalistic. Baker’s words provide a different interpretation of Sweeney’s silence, that not only is Sweeney incapable of producing sound, but incapable of being understood by

¹⁰⁴ Houston A Baker, “Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance,” *American Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1987): pg 84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712631>, accessed March 31, 2024.

¹⁰⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 153.

¹⁰⁶ David Edwards Jones, *The Plays of T. S. Eliot*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, pg 20.

¹⁰⁷ Houston A. Baker, “Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance,” pg 84.

¹⁰⁸ Houston A. Baker, “Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance,” pg 84.

¹⁰⁹ Houston A. Baker, “Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance,” pg 84.

¹¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney among the Nightingales,” pg 35.

white speakers. Interestingly enough, Sweeney admits this problem in “Sweeney Agonistes,” when he is finally provided a voice, “But if you understand or if you don't/That's nothing to me and nothing to you.”¹¹¹ Thus, Eliot writing to Sweeney using African and Black imagery in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance highlights the impact of Afro-modernism in Eliot's so-called “high-modernism.”¹¹²

Sweeney's change to becoming a character demanding to be understood through words also relates to Eliot's remarks that understanding poetry is understanding a feeling, not necessarily words, and his belief that drama worked differently.¹¹³ To Eliot, the drama he attempts to write in “Sweeney Agonistes” is like Seneca's “drama of words.”¹¹⁴

Sweeney and Seneca

Senecan tragedy was on Eliot's mind when he set out to write “Sweeney Agonistes.” In the same year the fragment was published, he published his essays on Seneca.¹¹⁵ Eliot's point in writing about Seneca is to have his audience reconsider the impact of Seneca on drama. He claims that many scholars do not consider Seneca a “dramatist,” which he refutes rather passionately, “What is “dramatic?”[...] “Seneca's is definitely a “form.””¹¹⁶ The key differences between the idea of “drama” and Senecan drama that Eliot highlights as being the repetitive and

¹¹¹ T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 153.

¹¹² For more on Eliot and “high-modernism,” see Louis Menand, “T. S. Eliot and Modernity,” *The New England Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (1996): pg 554–79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/366554>, accessed March 31, 2024.

¹¹³ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 15

¹¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 93.

¹¹⁵ See Khaghany pg 6.

¹¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 93.

“monotonous” nature of Seneca’s dialogue.¹¹⁷ Greek tragedy has beautiful language and represents an even “greater beauty still” in its ability to unite “the thought and feeling, action and speculation, in life.”¹¹⁸ In contrast, Seneca’s plays seem flat:

“In the plays of Seneca, the drama is all in the word, and the word has no further reality behind it. His characters all seem to speak with the same voice, and at the top of it; they recite in turn.”¹¹⁹

It is clear that this first description of Senecan drama is represented in “Sweeney Agonistes.” In my discussion of jazz and Sweeney, it is one way to read the repetitive nature of Sweeney and Doris’ dialogue as a product of maintaining rhythm and another to read the blending and repetition of the lines as his character speaks “with the same voice” and reciting “in turn.”¹²⁰ In Seneca’s tragedies, his characters often participate in stichomythic dialogue, where one character uses the phrase of the character before it to begin their sentence. For example, the dialogue between Jason and Medea in Seneca’s *Medea*,

Jason: Ingrata vita est cuius acceptae pudet.

Med: Retineuda non est cuius acceptae pudet.¹²¹

Jason: One is ungrateful for life that one is ashamed to have accepted.

Medea: Then one should not retain a life which one is ashamed to have accepted.¹²²

¹¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 93.

¹¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 93.

¹¹⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 83.

¹²⁰ In his letter, T. S. Eliot provided Flanagan with extra elements to add to his fragments, including flat voices, see T. S. Eliot, Valerie Eliot, and John Haffenden, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. 6, pg. 567-8.

¹²¹ O. Zwierlein, 1986. *L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae*, Oxford

¹²² Original Translation

In this scene, Medea's argument builds from the words of Jason, which Eliot argues creates the illusion that Seneca's characters are speaking with the same voice. Here is a similar example from "Sweeney Agonistes":

DORIS: That's not life, that's no life
 Why I'd just as soon be dead.
 SWEENEY: That's what life is. Just is
 DORIS:What is?
 What's that life is?
 SWEENEY:Life is death.¹²³

In Eliot, the repetition of phrases causes trouble in distinguishing the tone of the individual characters, exacerbated only by Eliot's intention for his characters' diction not to have too much expression.¹²⁴ In this section of "Sweeney Agonistes," Doris and Sweeney come to the same conclusion that a "life" of "birth, copulation, and death" is a life of "death."¹²⁵ In 1933, Hallie Flanagan of Vassar College sent a letter to Eliot that they wished to perform the two fragments of "Sweeney Agonistes."¹²⁶ Eliot replied, "I have no objection to your doing Sweeney, what of him though I cannot imagine what anybody can do without me there to direct it."¹²⁷ Eliot admits that the tone of the play is hard to understand without the author of the drama present. He admits the same about Seneca and his drama: the center of understanding Senecan tragedy is knowing "the way in which [Seneca] says it."¹²⁸ Seneca's tragedies are unique in the fact that Seneca himself was an actor; it is stipulated that the plays were performed only for Emperor Nero, thus

¹²³ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 150.

¹²⁴ See T. S. Eliot, Valerie Eliot, and John Haffenden, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. 6, pg. 567-8.

¹²⁵ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 146,147,150.

¹²⁶ Kinley E. Roby, *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, pg 21; In his letter, T. S. Eliot provided Flanagan with extra elements to add to his fragments, see T. S. Eliot, Valerie Eliot, and John Haffenden, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. 6, pg. 567-8.

¹²⁷ Kinley E. Roby, *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, Pg 22. Eliot, T. S., Valerie Eliot, and John Haffenden, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. 6, pg. 567-8.

¹²⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 83.

demanding a small cast of professional actors, including the playwright himself.¹²⁹ I believe that this element of Senecan tragedy that Eliot tried to imitate was a key factor in the failures of “Sweeney Agonistes.” Eliot admitted that he wanted to provide his audience with entertainment and that the intellect of the main character in his drama should be the “same level of intellect as any member of the audience.”¹³⁰ At the same time, Eliot’s return to the tradition of Senecan tragedy made it impossible for the tone of his characters to be understood by anyone but himself. Regardless of Eliot’s desire to incorporate modernist techniques of jazz rhythms and the central figure Sweeney being a common man, his desire for classical tradition sabotaged his medium entirely.

Another aspect of Senecan Tragedy that Eliot brings into “Sweeney Agonistes” is illuminated in his essay: “The characters in a play of Seneca behave more like members of a minstrel troupe sitting in a semicircle, rising in turn each to do his “number,” or varying their recitations by a song or a little back-chat.”¹³¹ Eliot refers to Seneca’s *Hercules Furens* as an example, as Hercules himself does not appear on stage until line 532, where he immediately vanishes. Eliot explains that this would have appeared boring to a Greek audience, as the action is limited to pantomimed scenes at the end of Hercules murdering his family.¹³² The same can be recognized in Seneca’s *Medea*, where the magical actions and gore are limited to the possibility of a pantomimed action at the end of the play.¹³³

It is more interesting that Eliot relates this Senecan technique to a “minstrel group” waiting to take a turn on the stage. He includes this medium in “Sweeney Agonistes” by

¹²⁹ Helen Slaney, (2019), *Seneca: Medea*, London, pg 2, accessed as an Ebook.

¹³⁰ David Edwards Jones, *The Plays of T. S. Eliot*, pg 30.

¹³¹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 84.

¹³² T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 84.

¹³³ For pantomime in *Medea*, see Helen Slaney, (2019), *Seneca: Medea*, London, pg 73, accessed as an Ebook.

including a song by the characters Klipstein, Krumpacker, Wauchoup, and Horsfall.¹³⁴ As the four characters sing, Snow and Swarts dress up as the minstrel show characters Tambo and Bones, and although their role is not enumerated, they accompany the song with a dance or physical show as typical of a minstrel group.¹³⁵ Eliot disperses these musical numbers in the midst of the dialogue between Doris and Sweeney to describe what life would be like on “crocodile island,” mimicking the Senecan plot descriptions accompanied by pantomimed dance.¹³⁶

This technique, if staged correctly, could provide entertainment to the audience through music and movements to accompany these lines. I believe that Eliot succeeded in utilizing Seneca’s technique of pantomime, which he claims “is full of statements useful only to an audience which sees nothing,” however, in doing so, he compromises his character, Sweeney.¹³⁷

To Eliot, the level of detail in the spoken words of Seneca provides an audience with the story regardless of how the players and stage may appear. Furthermore, Eliot states that “the characters of Seneca’s plays have no subtlety and no “private life,”” in fact, they are a “construction” of “his moral philosophy and that of Roman Stoicism in general.”¹³⁸ Eliot explains that Seneca’s characters can be understood because readers understand Seneca. In understanding his philosophy and Roman stoicism as a whole, audiences of Seneca can understand the negative connotations of *Medea* in a fury and that Hercules’ mad “rage” is what leads to his downfall.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Bálint Szele, "Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes," pg 169.

¹³⁵ Bálint Szele, "Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes," pg 169.

¹³⁶ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 146-147.

¹³⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 84.

¹³⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 84.

¹³⁹ For *Medea* and stoicism, see Helen Slaney, (2019), *Seneca: Medea*, London, pg 6, accessed as an Ebook.

Unlike Seneca, Eliot's philosophies cannot be traced through his poetry. Eliot undergoes significant changes between his life at Harvard, Oxford, and Faber and Faber, including rejoining The Church of England in the same year as "Sweeney Agonistes."¹⁴⁰ Even Eliot himself explains that genuine poetry, presumably his own, "can communicate before it is understood."¹⁴¹ Furthermore, uncovering Eliot's philosophies in 1927 is difficult, with his return to the Church of England as well as his earning his British Citizenship: the Eliot writing "Sweeney Agonistes" is not the same as who wrote his poetry.¹⁴²

Thus, I return to Sweeney, whom Eliot has described to his poetic audience in four separate poems, detailing Sweeney as the fleshy, bestial man in the company of prostitutes. According to Kinley Roby, it was Eliot's intention to find a new placement for Sweeney, perhaps to continue his conversation from his first writing of "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," in a different way.¹⁴³ However, in his adaptation of the Senecan technique of poetry in words and flat characters who are reliant on the philosophy of their writer, the "old" Sweeney disappears.

Thus, I return to dramatic Sweeney's failure to be understood. In the telling of his story about the man who "did a girl in," Sweeney's fellow players fail to recognize his point.¹⁴⁴ As the players continually ask Sweeney questions, he berates them with the phrase, "that don't apply," and repeats twice that he's "gotta use words when I talk to you," explaining that words are the only way they can understand him.¹⁴⁵ Eventually, he admits that regardless if they understand him, it is "nothing to me and nothing to you," giving up telling the story of the man.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ Stephen Spender, *T. S. Eliot*, pg. xii

¹⁴¹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 309.

¹⁴² See, "Biography: T. S. Eliot," *English Literature: Victorians and Moderns*, Lumen Learning, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-englishlitvictorianmodern/chapter/biography-23/> Accessed December 17, 2023.

¹⁴³ Kinley E. Roby, *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, pg 18.

¹⁴⁴ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama."152-153.

¹⁴⁵ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama."152-153.

¹⁴⁶ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama."152-153.

The Chorus' last lines foreshadow the "death" of dramatic Sweeney. The Chorus continues Sweeney's story by mimicking Sweeney, addressing "you" and repeating his line, "When you are alone [...]"¹⁴⁷ Yet, the chorus adds to his story the element of fear: "You've had a cream of a nightmare dream and you've got the hoo-ha's coming to you."¹⁴⁸ The pun in this phrase, "cream of a nightmare dream" and "hoo-ha's" seemingly relates back to "Sweeney Among the Nightingales."¹⁴⁹ As Carol Smith states, the "hoo-ha's" are a reference to a sexualized woman, reminiscent of the prostitutes "in the night" chasing after Sweeney in the pub.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, the chorus launches into a series of "HOO HA"s and "KNOCK"s to close the scene.¹⁵¹ The Nightingale's bird song is sung at night time as a loud series of whistles, trills, and gurgles.¹⁵² Strikingly, the specific onomatopoeic noises are reminiscent of bird sounds: the "hoot" of an owl or the "knock" of a thrush.¹⁵³ Sweeney has given up using words to explain his fear and is replaced by a chorus of onomatopoeic noises: the knock, a reference to the prologue where Doris was waiting for the fateful "knock" of the Hangman, and the "Hoo-Ha's," the nightingales, chasing Sweeney finally reaching him.¹⁵⁴

However, the women in "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" do not sing to Sweeney, but rather, the chorus of pantomime figures sings. As I have mentioned, the pantomime of Tambo and Bones was used to display the action of the words as they are read.¹⁵⁵ In the case of Senecan

¹⁴⁷ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama." 152-153.

¹⁴⁸ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama." 152-153.

¹⁴⁹ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama." 152-153.

¹⁵⁰ Carol H. Smith, "Sweeney Agonistes," In *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice: From Sweeney Agonistes to the Elder Statesman*, 72. Princeton University Press, 1963.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183q1f5.5>, accessed March 21, 2024

¹⁵¹ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama." 153-154.; Carol H. Smith, "Sweeney Agonistes."

¹⁵² For more information on the Nightingale, see Wikipedia, "Nightingale".

¹⁵³ For more information on the Owl, see wikipedia, "Owl"; for more information on "Thrush," see Wikipedia, "Thrush."

¹⁵⁴ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 153-154.

¹⁵⁵ See, Khaghany, pg 27.

tragedy, multiple dancers were used to accompany grotesque actions, sometimes of an individual such as in *Medea*, which can make it challenging to understand who in this scene the pantomime figures represent.¹⁵⁶ William V. Spanos explains, “It is to me - primarily because it is perilously close to absurdity- one of the most terrifying moments in modern literature, [...]” Spanos explains that the “knocks” of the hangman at the door represent Sweeney’s “dread” and “anxiety” of death coming for him to face.¹⁵⁷

The reference to “Sweeney and the Nightingales” lends a different understanding of what lies behind the door. As Herbert Knust illuminated in his article, Eliot’s use of bird imagery is no doubt connected to *Buile Suibhne*, specifically, the curse that changes Sweeney into a bird.¹⁵⁸ The loss of Sweeney’s human voice - which we are familiar with in Eliot’s Sweeney poetry - to a pantomimed song of bird-like sounds echoes the chaos and imagery of Sweeney’s mad transformation. Thus, it could be that Sweeney’s story ends with a transformation: from dramatic Sweeney to poetic Sweeney, from man to bird. Whereas the nature of this transformation will be further deduced in the next section, the discussion of whether Sweeney is “alive” or “dead” in the play feels irrelevant, as the Chorus admits:¹⁵⁹

“And perhaps you’re alive
And perhaps you’re dead”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Helen Slaney, (2019), *Seneca: Medea*, London, pg 73, accessed as an Ebook.

¹⁵⁷ William V. Spanos, ““Wanna Go Home, Baby?”: ‘Sweeney Agonistes’ as Drama of the Absurd.” *PMLA* 85, no. 1 (1970): pg 13, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1261427>, accessed March 31, 2024.

¹⁵⁸ Herbert Knust, "Sweeney Among the Birds and Brutes" *arcadia* 2, no. 1-3 (1967): pg 205. <https://doi.org/10.1515/arca.1967.2.1-3.204>, accessed March 31, 2024.

¹⁵⁹ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 154.

¹⁶⁰ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 154.

Conclusion: Sweeney's Metaphysics: "Perhaps you're alive, and perhaps you're dead"

Just as Eliot believed of Seneca, it is possible to attempt to understand Eliot's characters through an analysis of philosophy. In Eliot's years as a student at Oxford from 1911-1916, he relied on theories of metaphysics as a method of finding truth about human experience. Eliot believed that we cannot understand our "immediate experience," and thus, the role of art, specifically poetry, is to transform our "experience" into something we can look upon as an outsider.¹⁶¹ However, as Ward writes, at the end of Eliot's graduate thesis, Eliot's ideas are still growing: they are seen as in his "frigid" and "incomplete" thoughts about John Donne's "No Man is an Island."¹⁶²

In 1929, Eliot's interest in metaphysics culminated in his four critical essays on the philosophy of Irvine Babbitt. In these essays, Eliot attacks Babbitt's discussion of what is "human" against what is 'natural.'¹⁶³ Ward argues,

"Eliot looks for the consummation of man into something which cannot be called the self in a community of spirit which shall have its positive embodiment, not merely in idea, but in act; not merely in tradition, but in myth, ritual, and creed."¹⁶⁴

Eliot's criticism of Babbitt comes from his Anglican faith, which he converted to in 1927. To Eliot, "the Anglican faith [was] the only vital remaining vehicle of that tradition of dualism."¹⁶⁵

Although the backbone of Eliot's philosophy remains the same, Eliot asserts that the Anglican

¹⁶¹ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 36.

¹⁶² David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 36.

¹⁶³ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 37.

¹⁶⁴ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 38.

¹⁶⁵ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 30.

faith is the way for man to leave the fleshy world of the immediate experience behind and become one with spirit.

It is possible to read Sweeney's metaphysics as Eliot's development in his philosophy. Poetic Sweeney, written by an earlier Eliot, represents the failure of religious rituals to lead toward connection with spirit. Poetic Sweeney is not only "fleshy," but as Ward argues, a satirized Christ, in "Sweeney amongst the Nightingales," as described as a "maculate giraffe" is an obvious pun on the "immaculate" conception of Christ.¹⁶⁶ Ward furthers that in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," the phrase shifting "ham to ham," is a satire of Jesus' baptism, in which Eliot makes the once "spiritual" practice inherently fleshy by describing Sweeney's thighs bouncing in the bathtub.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, Sweeney is surrounded by "religious caterpillars" who represent "intellectual[s]" and "polymaths" who conduct religious ceremonies for money, symbolized as "bees" who pass the plate through the congregation.¹⁶⁸ He mentions "enervate" (weakened) Origine, a father of the ancient church, who castrated himself to leave behind the flesh and unite with the spirit.¹⁶⁹ Eliot utilizes a catalog of religious rituals and symbols to show the weakness of ritual in uniting poetic Sweeney with the spiritual world.

Dramatic Sweeney could be evidence of the man who, by following religious creed, left a fleshy world. In her article, "Lengthened Shadow of a Myth: The Herakles Motif in T. S. Eliot's Works," Laura Niesen de Abruña maps Sweeney as a Herakles figure - one that, at the end of his

¹⁶⁶ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 30.

¹⁶⁷ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 30.

¹⁶⁸ T. S. Eliot, "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," In *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*, by Thomas Stearns Eliot, 35, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980, pg 33-34.

¹⁶⁹ T. S. Eliot, "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," pg 33-34.

life, enters the spiritual world.¹⁷⁰ She explains that at the end of the “Fragment of Agon,” as supplied by the St. John of the Cross epigraph, Sweeney was foreshadowed to unite with the spiritual world.¹⁷¹ This St. John of the Cross epigraph reads: “Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the love of created beings.”¹⁷² She argues that central to Sweeney's character is his “agon”: his inability to process the suffering of created beings present in life and death.¹⁷³ According to St. John of the Cross, to reach “spiritual rebirth,” one must toil with and overcome the pain that comes with understanding this suffering.¹⁷⁴ At the end of “Fragment of Agon,” Sweeney’s fears reach their peak as they are realized in the song of the “hoo-has” and the “hangman” (death) knocking.¹⁷⁵ Instead of providing Sweeney with an apotheotic ending, Eliot leaves the play fragmented. Thus, Abruña claims that Eliot, although his epitaph intends to, never allowed Sweeney to ascend to the spiritual world: “Eliot leaves Sweeney with the horror of guilt no possibility of escape, despite the expectation by St. John of the Cross epigraph, that Sweeney would somehow achieve divine union.”¹⁷⁶ She furthers that Eliot possibly tried to rectify this fact in the live performances but never added the ending to the fragments to assure his audience of Sweeney’s success or failure.¹⁷⁷ As I have shown, Sweeney’s

¹⁷⁰ Laura Niesen de Abruña, “Lengthened Shadow of a Myth: The Herakles Motif in T. S. Eliot’s Works,” *South Atlantic Review* 52, no. 2 (1987): pg 65–84. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3200481>.

¹⁷¹ Laura Niesen de Abruña, “Lengthened Shadow of a Myth: The Herakles Motif in T. S. Eliot’s Works,” pg 75-76.

¹⁷² T. S. Eliot “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 135.

¹⁷³ Laura Niesen de Abruña, “Lengthened Shadow of a Myth: The Herakles Motif in T. S. Eliot’s Works,” pg 75-76.

¹⁷⁴ Laura Niesen de Abruña, “Lengthened Shadow of a Myth: The Herakles Motif in T. S. Eliot’s Works,” pg 75-76.

¹⁷⁵ Laura Niesen de Abruña, “Lengthened Shadow of a Myth: The Herakles Motif in T. S. Eliot’s Works,” pg 75-76; T. S. Eliot “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 153.

¹⁷⁶ Laura Niesen de Abruña, “Lengthened Shadow of a Myth: The Herakles Motif in T. S. Eliot’s Works,” pg 76.

¹⁷⁷ Laura Niesen de Abruña, “Lengthened Shadow of a Myth: The Herakles Motif in T. S. Eliot’s Works,” pg 75-76

possible transformation is relevant to the discussion of Sweeney's spiritual reconciliation.

However, as we are unsure of whether he is "alive or dead," I am inclined to follow Abruña in her belief in Eliot's abandonment of Sweeney, leaving us uncertain of his fate entirely.¹⁷⁸ Eliot's toil in combining modernist themes with classical traditions left his work fragmented, and his character Sweeney abandoned. Thus, Sweeney's death, without even being realized on stage, is present only as a lost connection between the author and his character.

Chapter 2: The Ghost of Sweeney

Introduction: The Ghost

Soon after writing "Sweeney Agonistes," Eliot began his article, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" (1928), a decisive piece outlining his new criteria for poetic drama.¹⁷⁹ In her article, "T. S. Eliot and the Problem of Modern Poetic Drama," Patsy Ann Slusser distinguishes that Eliot's beliefs concerning poetic and dramatic writing have merged, speaking on Shakespeare's most dramatic scenes, "what makes it most dramatic is what makes it most poetic."¹⁸⁰ Aligning with the more recent views of Marjorie Lightfoot, who in her article, "Charting Eliot's Course in Drama," suggests Eliot's later plays return to his "wasteland-like" poetic style; Eliot's experimentation with Sweeney-type plays was over.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 153.

¹⁷⁹ Patsy Ann Slusser, "T. S. Eliot and the Problem of Modern Poetic Drama," Master's thesis, Kansas State University, 1963, pg. 12, accessed March 29, 2024. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/33368768.pdf>.

¹⁸⁰ Patsy Ann Slusser, "T. S. Eliot and the Problem of Modern Poetic Drama," pg 12.

¹⁸¹ Marjorie J. Lightfoot, "Charting Eliot's Course in Drama," pg. 188.

Eliot worked with Sweeney's story in poetry and drama from 1917 to 1932 and, after one attempted drama, abandoned Sweeney in writing his later works. Eliot continued working on verse dramas, starting with the unsuccessful "The Rock" in 1933 and the raved "Murder in the Cathedral" in 1935.¹⁸² Speculation about Sweeney's abandonment has been offered: William V. Spanos suggests Sweeney's absurdist story is finished at the end of "Sweeney Agonistes," Lightfoot suggests that Eliot realized Sweeney's limitations in drama, or simply, as Slusser writes with Eliot's changing theories he became interested in pursuing new dramatic avenues.¹⁸³ In this second chapter, I suggest that in the early years, Sweeney never left Eliot's mind, lingering as a ghost during his writing of "Murder in the Cathedral." In comparing the form, subject matter, and techniques of Eliot's later verse drama to "Sweeney Agonistes," I uncover an avoidance of characters and themes similar to those embodied by Sweeney. Thus, I argue that Eliot was haunted by the limited techniques and characters of "Sweeney Agonistes."

Lastly, I continue to recognize the ghost of Eliot's Sweeney through the resurgence of "Sweeney Agonistes" in themes of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," through a biographical understanding and an article by Rick de Villiers: "'Of the Same Species': T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot."¹⁸⁴ I expand on de Villiers' argument through a deep analysis of playwriting technique, as well as a comparative analysis of "Sweeney" and Beckett's "Vladimir." In my analysis, I conclude that Sweeney's ghost is very much real.

¹⁸² Patsy Ann Slusser, "T. S. Eliot and the Problem of Modern Poetic Drama," pg 16, 24.

¹⁸³ Patsy Ann Slusser, "T. S. Eliot and the Problem of Modern Poetic Drama," pg 24; William V. Spanos, "'Wanna Go Home, Baby?': 'Sweeney Agonistes' as Drama of the Absurd," pg 13; Marjorie J. Lightfoot, "Charting Eliot's Course in Drama," pg 188.

¹⁸⁴ Rick de Villiers, "'Of the Same Species': T. S. Eliot's 'Sweeney Agonistes' and Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot.'" *English Studies in Africa*. 55, pg 18-28, accessed March 31, 2024.

The Ghost in Eliot's "Murder in a Cathedral": Death is life and life is Death



Illustration by Henri Matisse, *Dance*. 1910.

In his early work "Dance," Henri Matisse became involved with the flat perspective Art Historians now consider quintessential to the Fauvist movement.¹⁸⁵ In this piece, Matisse depicts five swirling nude dancers holding hands in a circle except for one small space, meant to invite the viewer in to join.¹⁸⁶ "Dance" received rageful and indignant reviews for its Fauvist color scheme (red, blue, and green), which, with minimal shading in the background, created the effect that the members of the dance were simply drawn on, offering little to no depth in the work, which was remarked by critics as too "simplified" for art.¹⁸⁷ Notable supporter of Matisse's work was the poet Apollinaire, who seemingly alone stood in Matisse's defense.¹⁸⁸ More notable was

¹⁸⁵ John Elderfield, "T. S. Eliot Meets Henri Matisse." *Gagosian Quarterly*. Last modified 2020, Accessed March 29, 2024,

<https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2022/01/24/essay-ts-eliot-meets-henri-matisse/>.

¹⁸⁶ John Elderfield, "T. S. Eliot Meets Henri Matisse."

¹⁸⁷ John Elderfield, "T. S. Eliot Meets Henri Matisse."

¹⁸⁸ John Elderfield, "T. S. Eliot Meets Henri Matisse."

the opinion of Matthew Stewart Prichard, who, in his doctoral thesis, offered, “They [Dance and Music] were quite strange to me; they looked like posters.”¹⁸⁹ It is believed that Prichard first saw Dance and Music in Paris with his good friend, T. S. Eliot.¹⁹⁰

T. S. Eliot was not known for his depth of understanding of contemporary art, in a letter to Prichard remarking, “Who is Kandinsky?”¹⁹¹ However, Eliot would have been aware of the critiques of “Dance,” which John Elderfield associates with Eliot’s critiques of Ben Johnson, which were written at the same time as premier viewings of “Dance.”¹⁹² Eliot uses similar language provided to “Dance” in describing Johnson’s work: “strong, simple outlines,” “simplification and flatness,” and “solidity and wholeness of surface.”¹⁹³

Moreover, it was Matisse’s resurgent ideas of “flat perspective” that brought the trend of Stencil art into the late-modernist and postmodernist era.¹⁹⁴ As Matisse slowly lost use of his hands due to old age, he began to create his flat images with paper cut-outs.¹⁹⁵ Credit for the pop-art movement popularized by Andy Warhol and Jean Michel-Basquiat goes to Henri Matisse, an Eliot contemporary, who not only provided a flat perspective to the audience but also the idea of stenciling - creating distinct borders between figures and the negative space that surrounds them.¹⁹⁶

¹⁸⁹ John Elderfield, “T. S. Eliot Meets Henri Matisse.”

¹⁹⁰ John Elderfield, “T. S. Eliot Meets Henri Matisse.”

¹⁹¹ John Elderfield, “T. S. Eliot Meets Henri Matisse.”

¹⁹² John Elderfield, “T. S. Eliot Meets Henri Matisse.”

¹⁹³ John Elderfield, “T. S. Eliot Meets Henri Matisse.”

¹⁹⁴ “Stenciling.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 6, 2016.

<https://www.britannica.com/art/stenciling>, for more on Matisse and flat perspective, see Jakob Rosenberg, “Master Drawings and Prints of the Twentieth Century.” In *On Quality in Art: Criteria of Excellence, Past and Present*, 13:207–28. Princeton University Press, 1967. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.5425897.14>.

¹⁹⁵ “Stenciling.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*

¹⁹⁶ “Stenciling.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*

In creating stencil art, the artist is firstly concerned with the space they must remove. Thus, the art is both crafting the stencil and the resulting picture of filled-in space. Extending this artistic metaphor to viewing Eliot's "post-Sweeney" drama "Murder in the Cathedral," one is made aware of what techniques, characters, and styles he first had to remove. I argue that "Sweeney Agonistes" serves as Eliot's stencil, which is revealed when removed from a new picture - an opposite - his "Murder in the Cathedral." In building "Murder in the Cathedral," Eliot remained astutely aware of the styles and techniques of "Sweeney Agonistes," evidence of ghostly Sweeney lingering in the mind of his playwright.

Time Thus Revealed The Ghost:

Just as he wrote Sweeney, Eliot's St. Thomas Becket was written to die. However, Becket's death is not bound by myth, imagery, or foreshadowing but by history and time. "Murder in the Cathedral" opens by announcing its ties to a historical place and time: the chorus of women nuns remarking, "Here let us stand, close by the cathedral" and the changing seasons from fall to winter, a year before Becket's death.¹⁹⁷ Specific references to the date, "December 2nd, 1170," "December 29th, 1170" are given as stage directions, and "December" is presented as dialogue by the second priest.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, Eliot was concerned with the historical accuracy of his stage: originally performing inside the Chapter House of the Canterbury

¹⁹⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935, pg 11.

¹⁹⁸ T. S. Eliot, "Murder in the Cathedral," pg 9, 17, 51.

Cathedral¹⁹⁹ A retelling of one of England's most famous stories, Eliot reminds his benefactors, players, directors, and audience of the play's connection to historical truth.

Eliot's reliance on time as a plot device is "Murder in the Cathedral"'s most opposite characteristic from "Sweeney Agonistes," a play that exists outside of any known location or time period. What can be gathered from the world of "Sweeney Agonistes" is that it contains contemporary popular culture elements such as jazz and the music hall genre in some unknown salon where one "pays rent."²⁰⁰ More importantly, time in "Sweeney Agonistes" cannot be measured - most of Sweeney's lines refute the finality of birth and death and admit that distinguishing between "life is death" is impossible.²⁰¹ Not only are the characters immune to the effects of time, but they are also trapped in a progressless world: knowing that there is no end to "paying the rent" and "singing their tune" as "death" or "life" does not "apply" to them.²⁰²

Murder in the Cathedral is a progression of history: from life to death to the afterlife. Just as with Chekhov's *Gun*, in the first act, Eliot announces Becket's death and, in the last act, delivers the death on stage.²⁰³ Particularly unlike Sweeney, St. Thomas Becket's changing sentiments of martyrdom showcases Becket's command over time. In the first act, Becket reifies time as a "wheel" that only the "fool" believes that they can turn, as that power lies only with god.²⁰⁴ Preying on Becket's desire to be remembered as a martyr, the fourth tempter displays that

¹⁹⁹ James E. Robinson, "'Murder in the Cathedral' as Theatre of the Spirit." *Religion & Literature* 18, no. 2 (1986): pg 40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40059312>, accessed March 31, 2024; For interpretations of "Murder in the Cathedral"'s historic realism in film, see Thomas R. Vozzella, "T. S. Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral': The Dramatic Music." *The Choral Journal* 44, no. 9 (2004): 39–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23554930>.

²⁰⁰ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 151-153.

²⁰¹ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 151-153.

²⁰² T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 150-153.

²⁰³ T. S. Eliot, "Murder in the Cathedral," pg 18, 74.

²⁰⁴ T. S. Eliot, "Murder in the Cathedral," pg 21.

through this desire, men are continually locked in the repetition of past mistakes.²⁰⁵ However, by the end of the play, Beckett commands his death as an act “out of time”.²⁰⁶

“THOMAS: You think me reckless, desperate and mad.
 You argue by results, as this world does,
 To settle if an act be good or bad.
 You defer to the fact. For every life and every act
 Consequence of good and evil can be shown.
 And as in time results of many deeds are blended
 So good and evil in the end become confounded.
 It is not in time that my death shall be known;
 It is out of time that my decision is taken
 If you call that decision
 To which my whole being gives entire consent.
 I give my life
 To the Law of God above the Law of Man.
 Unbar the door! unbar the door!
 We are not here to triumph by fighting, by stratagem, or by resistance,
 Not to fight with beasts as men. We have fought the beast
 And have conquered. We have only to conquer
 Now, by suffering. This is the easier victory.
 Now is the triumph of the Cross, now
 Open the door! I command it. OPEN THE DOOR!”²⁰⁷

Here, Beckett describes time’s power over historical truth: blends “good” and “evil” deeds until they are “confounded.”²⁰⁸ He states that men give power to time, “defer to the fact,” to reveal truths, when in fact it does the opposite.²⁰⁹ Taking control over his death, his “decision to which [his] whole being gives entire consent,” Beckett does not wait for his death to arrive “in time” but decides when it shall happen, commanding the priests to “unbar” and “open the door!”²¹⁰ In a

²⁰⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Murder in the Cathedral,” pg 38, Becket is visited by the fourth tempter, who repeats lines from Becket’s earlier dialogue and explains that the “pattern” of “suffering” martyrs in the Christian religion makes the “wheel” of “be still,” even as it turns.

²⁰⁶ T. S. Eliot, “Murder in the Cathedral,” pg 71.

²⁰⁷ T. S. Eliot, “Murder in the Cathedral,” pg 71.

²⁰⁸ T. S. Eliot, “Murder in the Cathedral,” pg 71.

²⁰⁹ T. S. Eliot, “Murder in the Cathedral,” pg 71.

²¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, “Murder in the Cathedral,” pg 71-72.

powerful progression of logic, St. Thomas Becket becomes the anti-Sweeney, freed from a cyclical reification of time.

In his article, "Form as Agent," Pickering describes the Tempters as episodic characters that display "clear logic" of Becket's growth as a character who defies time.²¹¹ Furthermore, Pickering believes that all of "Murder in the Cathedral" is "episodic," as each succeeding event separated by a choral interlude takes "the audience deeper into the emotional/spiritual complex." Eliot's dramatic style has his audience's understanding in mind.²¹²

"The poet wished to give the audience a sense of history in a neutral vocabulary and style, not entirely a modern one, avoiding excessive use of iambic feet. He employed formal speech and prayer and liturgy appropriate to his Christian subject, for the most part, but prose political speeches and a sermon interrupt the verse, and domestic problems are discussed by the women of Canterbury in neutral or modern language."²¹³

By combining "neutral" and "modern language" while avoiding Elizabethan "excessive iambic feet," Eliot caters the understanding of his dramatic language to his modern audience.²¹⁴ His "sense of history" and limited use of allusions, "prayer," and "liturgy," familiar to a modern Christian audience, aid in the audience's understanding of the play's contents.²¹⁵ Eliot's clear logic and clarity of speech have led to a general understanding of "Murder in the Cathedral" as a didactic play. Francis White Fry solidifies this argument through the centrality of Becket's sermon, the most direct example of plain speech in a familiar Christian form.²¹⁶

²¹¹ Jerry V Pickering, "Form as Agent: Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral,'" *Educational Theatre Journal* 20, no. 2 (1968): pg 203. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3204903>.

²¹² Jerry V. Pickering, "Form as Agent: Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral,'" pg 201.

²¹³ Jerry V. Pickering, "Form as Agent: Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral,'" pg 201.

²¹⁴ Jerry V. Pickering, "Form as Agent: Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral,'" pg 201.

²¹⁵ Jerry V. Pickering, "Form as Agent: Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral,'" pg 201.

²¹⁶ Frances White Fry, "The Centrality of the Sermon in T. S. Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral,'" *Christianity and Literature* 27, no. 4 (1978): pg 7–14. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26290044>.

In his article, “The Centrality of the Sermon,” Fry reiterates that “Murder in the Cathedral” was Eliot’s attempt to unite literature and religion: “an interplay which he hoped to revitalize by returning to the ritualistic roots of Christian liturgical drama in a search for methods and materials which could be adapted to modern needs.”²¹⁷ As Eliot writes in his Essay, “Dialogue in Poetic Drama,” a year of mass, “small drama[s],” presents the “full drama of creation.”²¹⁸ As Ward explains in his article on Eliot’s philosophy, Eliot’s criticism of Babbitt revealed his interest in using techniques of Anglicanism over humanism in writing.²¹⁹ Becket’s sermon, according to Fry, is the balancing point between dramatic history and reality, as it is set between Act 1 and Act 2 and is spoken in prose rather than verse.²²⁰

“Eliot was especially sensitive to the effects of this kind of stylistic transition, which he characterizes as a “jolt” and which, in the 1951 essay “Poetry and Drama,” he describes as “justifiable when the author wishes to transport the audience violently from one plane of reality to another”²²¹

Becket’s shift from verse to prose speaking provides the “jolt,” as the audience is removed from the dramatic form and transported to the familiar, didactic prose language of a traditional sermon.²²² Becket forms a direct connection with the audience, alone on stage, and speaks to them, “Dear children of God,” while explaining the role of the martyr.²²³ Becket announces that “we” - the audience - should “mourn” and “rejoice” in the martyr, and at the end of his sermon,

²¹⁷ Frances White Fry, “The Centrality of the Sermon in T. S. Eliot’s ‘Murder in the Cathedral,’” pg 7.

²¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, “Dialogue in Poetic Drama,” pg 48.

²¹⁹ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, pg 30.

²²⁰ Frances White Fry, “The Centrality of the Sermon in T. S. Eliot’s ‘Murder in the Cathedral,’” pg 8.

²²¹ Frances White Fry, “The Centrality of the Sermon in T. S. Eliot’s ‘Murder in the Cathedral,’” pg 8.

²²² Frances White Fry, “The Centrality of the Sermon in T. S. Eliot’s ‘Murder in the Cathedral,’” pg 8.

²²³ T. S. Eliot, “Murder in the Cathedral,” pg 47.

he announces his death, "It is possible in a short time you may have another martyr."²²⁴ Fry explains that Becket's sermon thus provides an "objective correlative" for the audience so that when Becket dies, the audience knows the process in which they should react: a traditional "Christian ritual cleansing" of suffering followed by rejoicing.²²⁵

Fry argues that Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral" is an attempt at religious didacticism within literature. However, Eliot's dramatic techniques provide that central to "Murder the Cathedral" is understanding. Eliot chooses to display a clear logical plot, provide historical background in a neutral language, and outline appropriate emotional reactions. "Sweeney Agonistes" contains none of these techniques. Although Eliot intended for the language and rhythm of "Sweeney Agonistes" to be familiar to his audience by including Jazz and the music hall genre, Sweeney's repetitive Senecan dialogue with less than classic meter does not cater to a lay audience.²²⁶ Furthermore, central to Sweeney's character is misunderstanding; his "words" and "stories" mean "nothing to me and nothing to you."²²⁷ The misunderstanding between Sweeney and his players is evident by their actions - the characters ask questions that do not "apply" to Sweeney's story.²²⁸ Unlike "Murder's" chorus, Sweeney's chorus' "songs" are distractions from reality, summarizing his words in music but denying his voice.²²⁹

"We're gonna sit here and drink this booze,
We're gonna sit here and have a tune"²³⁰

²²⁴ T. S. Eliot, "Murder in the Cathedral," pg 50.

²²⁵ Frances White Fry, "The Centrality of the Sermon in T. S. Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral,'" pg 8.

²²⁶ See Khaghany 20 for more on Eliot's meter.

²²⁷ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 151-153.

²²⁸ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 151-153.

²²⁹ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 151-153.

²³⁰ T. S. Eliot "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 153.

Furthermore, where Becket's sermon outlines the process of "suffering" to "rejoice" in the power of Christian spiritual regeneration, Eliot abandons Sweeney - and thus his audience - in his moment of ritual cleansing by leaving Sweeney's ending unwritten.²³¹

The Moment of Death

In Eliot's essay on Senecan Drama, he writes on the importance of the moment of death.

"The posture which gives the greatest opportunity for effect, hence for the Senecan morality, is the posture of dying: death gives his characters the opportunity for their most sententious aphorisms—a hint which Elizabethan dramatists were only too ready to follow."²³²

By announcing his death in the title and opening of his play, Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral" takes place in the "posture" of Becket's death.²³³ Eliot announces, foreshadows, and displays Becket's death on stage, using his two-act play to explain to his audience how to understand Becket's suffering.²³⁴ Although his death is prophesied, Sweeney is never rewarded his moment of aphorism and clarity.²³⁵ Like the pieces of a stencil, in every moment where "Murder in the Cathedral" provides, remnants of "Sweeney Agonistes" are revealed in techniques Eliot took away.

Marjorie Lightfoot comments on the success of "Murder in the Cathedral" as a turning point in Eliot's career as a dramatist.²³⁶ Still an "experimental play," "Murder in the Cathedral" is Eliot's first success.²³⁷ His use of neutral and modern language became a turning point in his writing of the chorus - most notably, he carries this technique into his later plays.²³⁸ "Murder in

²³¹ See Khaghany 33 for more on Sweeney's abandonment.

²³² T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 72.

²³³ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 72.

²³⁴ See Jerry V Pickering, "Form as Agent: Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral,'" pg 201.

²³⁵ See Khaghany 33 for more on Sweeney's abandonment.

²³⁶ Marjorie J. Lightfoot, "Charting Eliot's Course in Drama," pg 188.

²³⁷ Marjorie J. Lightfoot, "Charting Eliot's Course in Drama," pg 188.

²³⁸ Marjorie J. Lightfoot, "Charting Eliot's Course in Drama," pg 188.

the Cathedral” is considered one of Eliot’s most widely appreciated dramas. However, credit for its success must be given to Eliot’s experience writing “Sweeney Agonistes,” the ghost that haunted its playwright.

Eliot the Poet and Eliot the Critic:

In thinking of the impact of “Sweeney Agonistes,” the work of Samuel Beckett cannot be ignored. In the Samuel Beckett scholarly community, there is hesitancy in crafting firm opinions on the connection between the writing of T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett.²³⁹ Most likely because, although there is no doubt that Beckett had a relationship with Eliot, the nature of that relationship is highly debated.²⁴⁰ In his book, *Eliot and Beckett’s Low Modernism*, de Villiers recognizes that both Beckett and Eliot wrote “low modernism,” works that concerned themes of death, decay, and low members of society.²⁴¹ He explains that this undeniably ties their work together concerning themes of humility and humanity.²⁴² Chris Ackerly and S.E. Gontarski admit that Eliot’s early poetry “infiltrated” Samuel Beckett’s works.²⁴³ Similarly, they suggest that Beckett was familiar with Eliot’s later work, speculating that the four quartets are present in Beckett’s *Endgame*.²⁴⁴ What cannot be ignored is the significance of Beckett’s friend Thomas

²³⁹ Rick de Villiers, ‘Of the Same Species’: T. S. Eliot’s Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*,” pg 19.

²⁴⁰ Rick de Villiers, ‘Of the Same Species’: T. S. Eliot’s Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*,” pg 19.

²⁴¹ Rick de Villier, “Introduction.” In *Eliot and Beckett’s Low Modernism: Humility and Humiliation*, pg 2. Edinburgh University Press, 2021.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv27qzs1f.6>.

²⁴² Rick de Villier, “Introduction.” In *Eliot and Beckett’s Low Modernism: Humility and Humiliation*, pg 2.

²⁴³ Chris Ackerly and S. E. Gontarski, “T. S. Eliot” In *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader’s Guide to His Works, Life, and Thought*, pg 167. New York: Grove Press, 2004.

²⁴⁴ Chris Ackerly and S. E. Gontarski, “T. S. Eliot” pg 167.

McGreevey, who in 1931 published a book on Eliot as a great catholic writer, specifically, that *The Wasteland* was a great catholic poem.²⁴⁵ MacGreevey's Eliot received both praise and criticism, but from Beckett, only praise.²⁴⁶ In his letter to MacGreevey, he writes how much he enjoys McGreevey's prose and the discussion of Eliot's poetry.²⁴⁷

In 1935, Eliot visited TCD and UCD to give a speech on the state of Irish Literature.²⁴⁸ Eliot, at this time, had reverted to his Anglican faith and was going through a period of conservatism, no doubt contradicting MacGreevey's work. Beckett attended the lecture at TCD and, in a letter to MacGreevey, quotes Eliot's words as "the old fall back on pedagogics."²⁴⁹ It would be reductionist to announce Beckett's declining opinion of Eliot as one based purely on MacGreevey's religious sentiment. Beckett's first works were published through Faber and Faber in London at the time when Eliot worked, and thus, Beckett, in his early career (late stage as a writer, however), had gone through the trouble of publishing Murphy and his three novels in close proximity to Eliot.²⁵⁰ Beckett's opinion of Eliot as a scholar was also beginning to diminish, as, although he never published his reviews, he criticized Eliot's translations of Dante and "Anabase" in French: notably, for "Anabase," Beckett kept both the French and the English open while he was reading Eliot's translation as if he were checking up on its correctness.²⁵¹

²⁴⁵ Samuel Beckett, Martha Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig, and Daniel Gunn. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1, pg 571; James Matthew Wilson, "Thomas MacGreevey reads T. S. Eliot and Jack B. Yeats: making modernism Catholic." *Yeats Eliot Review*, vol. 23, no. 3-4, fall-winter 2006, pp. 14+. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A166944316/LitRC?u=mmln_m_bostcoll&sid=googleScholar&xid=3e167945. Accessed 31 Mar. 2024.

²⁴⁶ Samuel Beckett, Martha Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig, and Daniel Gunn. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1, pg 64.

²⁴⁷ Samuel Beckett, Martha Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig, and Daniel Gunn. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1, pg 64.

²⁴⁸ Chris Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, "T. S. Eliot" pg 167.

²⁴⁹ Chris Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, "T. S. Eliot" pg 167.

²⁵⁰ Chris Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, "T. S. Eliot" pg 167.

²⁵¹ Samuel Beckett, Martha Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig, and Daniel Gunn. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1, letter 39 and 57.

Beckett's language in his letters to MacGreevey declines into quips: "Eliot is toilet spelt backwards" or calling him a "jewel thief."²⁵² Thus, although Beckett had a complicated relationship with early and late Eliot, specifically the relationship between a poet and a critic, it leaves us to wonder what Beckett thought of Eliot, the playwright.

In his essay, "Of the Same Species: T. S. Eliot's 'Sweeney Agonistes' and Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot,'" Rick de Villiers establishes a comparison between "*En Attendant Godot*" and "Sweeney Agonistes," comparing themes, characters, and setting to establish a line of influence between Sweeney and Beckett's great work, "Waiting for Godot."

Waiting for Pereira and Godot

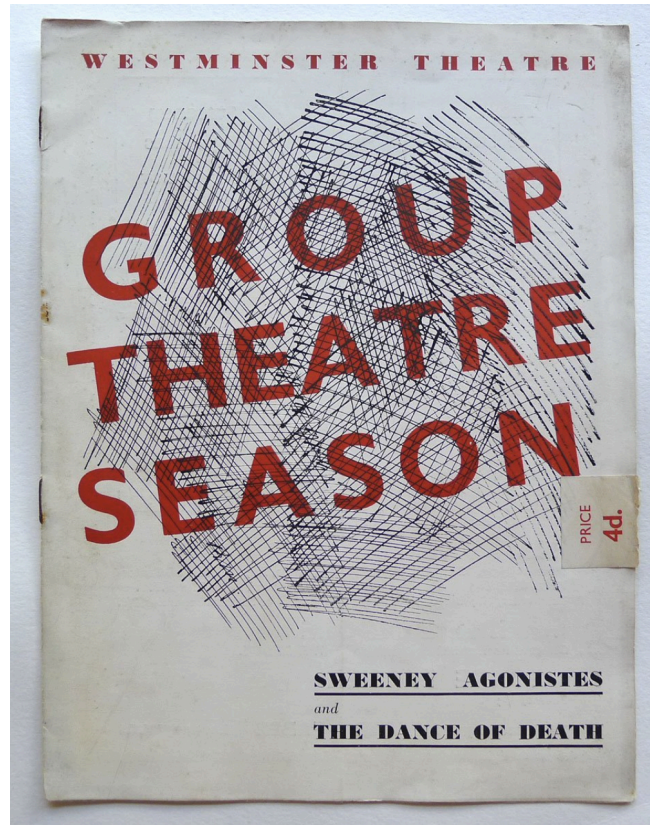
In a letter on October 8th, 1935, to Thomas MacGreevey, Beckett writes that he was interested in seeing the production of "Sweeney Agonistes" in the Westminster Theatre.²⁵³ Although it is unclear whether Beckett attended the show, it is undeniable that the writer was aware of its presence. Although Sweeney was written in 1927, Eliot hesitated to publish the work until 1931 in a series of unfinished works, relaying that although Eliot did not believe the play successful enough to be displayed on its own, he found it promising enough to be displayed along with his portfolio of work.²⁵⁴ Notably, there are aspects of Sweeney that we can gather would have been included in its limited performances. In talking to Hallie Flanagan in the production of "Sweeney Agonistes" in London, Eliot expressed his desire for Sweeney to be

²⁵² Rick de Villiers, 'Of the Same Species': T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot," pg 19.

²⁵³ Samuel Beckett, Martha Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig, and Daniel Gunn. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1, pg 284.

²⁵⁴ Rick de Villiers, 'Of the Same Species': T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot," pg 19.

scrambling eggs at the beginning of the second scene, possibly for the symbolism that eggs hold with birth and life, and as they are scrambled, death.²⁵⁵



Playbill Illustration by Robert Medley, *Sweeney Agonistes and the Dance of Death*, 1934

As de Villiers states, unlike Beckett's frequent denouncing of his connection to Joyce, Beckett's appreciation (or not) for Eliot's drama is less than certain.²⁵⁶ De Villiers' explains that at "first glance," "Sweeney Agonistes" and "Waiting for Godot" share a "less than perfect" resemblance, but share a resemblance nonetheless.²⁵⁷ Firstly, as seen in the production of "Sweeney Agonistes" at Westminster, Sweeney was deliberately left open-ended, both on account of producer Donne

²⁵⁵ In his letter, T. S. Eliot provided Flanagan with extra elements to add to his fragments, see T. S. Eliot, Valerie Eliot, and John Haffenden, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. 6, pg. 567-8.

²⁵⁶ Rick de Villiers, 'Of the Same Species': T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*," pg 19.

²⁵⁷ Rick de Villiers, 'Of the Same Species': T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*," pg 19.

and Eliot himself.²⁵⁸ By ending the play with nine unanswered knocks, William Spanos remarks that, like “Waiting for Godot,” “Sweeney Agonistes” could have been called “Waiting for Pereira,” assumably the character who was knocking.²⁵⁹ De Villiers’ most compelling argument, however, unites “Waiting for Godot” and “Sweeney Agonistes” through each author’s treatment of their character’s “soul:”

“There is between them a shared though differently handled interest in the soul and its suffering, a comparable calling into question of life’s worth, a similar wrestle in the dance.”²⁶⁰

De Villiers’ most prominent argument surrounding the similarities of Beckett’s and Eliot’s dealings with the human soul is his opinion of both drama’s “conceptions of time.”²⁶¹ Godot is remarkable in its “Sisyphean” trajectory; as stated by de Villiers, the play’s beginning, middle, and end have no relevance.²⁶² Moreover, the characters in Godot have provoked anxiety about understanding time, as seen in Vladimir and Didi’s debate about what “day” it is and what happened “yesterday,” as well as Pozzo’s descent into blindness and banishment of time altogether.²⁶³ The characters in Godot become Beckett’s “tragic” figures in their inability to break the enslavement of their creation through intellectual, religious, or even suicidal means. Beckett confirms this truth memorably in the play’s first act: Vladimir and Estragon question whether

²⁵⁸ Rick de Villiers, ‘Of the Same Species’: T. S. Eliot’s Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot,” pg 19.

²⁵⁹ Rick de Villiers, ‘Of the Same Species’: T. S. Eliot’s Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot,” pg 23.

²⁶⁰ Rick de Villiers, ‘Of the Same Species’: T. S. Eliot’s Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot,” pg 19.

²⁶¹ Rick de Villiers, ‘Of the Same Species’: T. S. Eliot’s Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot,” pg 18.

²⁶² Rick de Villiers, ‘Of the Same Species’: T. S. Eliot’s Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot,” pg 21.

²⁶³ Samuel Beckett, “Waiting for Godot.” In *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 90-100. London: Faber and Faber, 2006, pg 16, 80.

they should repent “being born,” a sin Beckett refers to as “socimalorum,” the original sin for any tragic figure.²⁶⁴

Sweeney, too, expresses anxiety over his creation, specifically his birth, “I was already born once, I do not need to be born again.”²⁶⁵ Ironically, Sweeney is one of Eliot's few recurring characters throughout his poetry, essentially born many times. The irony of Sweeney's words is consistent with the play's metaphysical themes: the overlap of birth, life, and death, as well as of metempsychosis as seen in the rebirth of poetic Sweeney in drama.²⁶⁶ As stated before, Eliot writes in Sweeney's action of making scrambled eggs into the live performance of the play to emphasize Sweeney's own words: “Death is life and life is Death.”²⁶⁷ Sweeney verbally conflates death and murder with life as he tells the story of the girl who “got done in” who looked “asleep” in the bathtub.²⁶⁸ In the same way, Vladimir and Gogo are unable to leave their created world, to stop “waiting for Godot,” Sweeney admits that he (and the other characters) are unable to break the cycle of their creation:

“We all gotta do what we gotta do
We're gonna sit here and drink this booze
We're gonna sit here and have a tune
We're gonna stay and we're gonna go
And somebody's gotta pay the rent”²⁶⁹

In Sweeney's fictional world that seems to disobey the cycle of life and death, “paying the rent” is deemed a necessity.²⁷⁰ Furthermore, Sweeney's mention of “booze” and “music” point to an

²⁶⁴ Samuel Beckett, “Waiting for Godot,” pg 13 ; Rick de Villiers, ‘Of the Same Species’: T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot,” pg 21.

²⁶⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 147.

²⁶⁶ T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 150.

²⁶⁷ See Khaghany 48 for more on Sweeney's “scrambled eggs”; T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 150.

²⁶⁸ T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 152.

²⁶⁹ Samuel Beckett, “Waiting for Godot.” pg 13; T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 153.

²⁷⁰ T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 153.

element of escapism to stop his mumbling about “life and death.”²⁷¹ Thus, I believe de Villiers is correct in connecting the treatment of “souls” in “Godot” and “Sweeney Agonistes”: doomed in their creation.

Vladimir and Sweeney “Use their Intelligence”

In her book, *Say It: The Performative Voice in the Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett*, Sarah West writes on the most central pillar of Beckett literature: the “wilful voice which insists on speaking and being heard.”²⁷² Beckett struggled to publish his creative work until he was in his forties, and like himself, the characters in his three novels and *Murphy* are often consumed with the question of whether anyone can hear them.²⁷³ The same can be said for Pozzo in “Waiting for Godot,” who insists that he hates “talking into a vacuum” and asks, “Is everyone listening to me?”²⁷⁴ However, in one unique moment of metaphysical epiphany in “Waiting for Godot,” Beckett’s character Vladimir struggles to convince their players to not only hear but to understand him. In focusing on the power of language and words in “Waiting for Godot,” Beckett harkens on an essential theme in “Sweeney Agonistes”: of characters’ being understood.

In Act 2, Vladimir interrupts Estragon in a break of his usual tone: “Let us not waste our time in idle discourse!”²⁷⁵ In this lengthy dialogue, Vladimir begins to question his and Estragon’s decision to wait for Godot,

“Vladimir: Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (*Pause. Vehemently.*) Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To

²⁷¹ T. S. Eliot, “Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama,” pg 150.

²⁷² Sarah West, *Say It: The Performative Voice in the Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2010, pg 13.

²⁷³ Sarah West, *Say It: The Performative Voice in the Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett*, pp 13.

²⁷⁴ Samuel Beckett, “Waiting for Godot,” pg 31.

²⁷⁵ Samuel Beckett, “Waiting for Godot,” pg 74.

all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say? (*Estragon says nothing.*) It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species. The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners without the least reflection, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets. But that is not the question. What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come—²⁷⁶

Vladimir's tone is comparable to Shakespeare's Hamlet, specifically as he remarks, "What are we doing here, *that* is the question."²⁷⁷ Vladimir's tone adds a metaphysical element; when asking what they are "doing here," one is reminded how atypical Beckett's progressless play is to Shakespeare's resolved tragedies and comedies.²⁷⁸ Vladimir's consistent use of the jussive in phrases like, "Let us make the most of it," and "Let us do something," is responded to by Estragon's silence, specifically in the stage direction "Estragon says nothing."²⁷⁹ Later, Estragon interrupts Vladimir's speech with an unprompted scream, "Ah!"²⁸⁰ As Vladimir continues his tangent, he again asks if Estragon "follow[s] his reasoning?"²⁸¹ Estragon responds, "We are all born mad. Some remain so," with the stage direction of "aphoristic for once."²⁸² Estragon's words are aphoristic but vague in how they pertain to Vladimir's crisis of wanting to "do something."²⁸³ In this scene, Vladimir is interrupted and ignored, and his conversation is ended

²⁷⁶ Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," pg 74

²⁷⁷ For more on "Waiting for Godot" and Hamlet, See Stanley van der Ziel (2019) *Godot's Shakespeare*, Irish Studies Review, 27:1, 38-55, DOI: 10.1080/09670882.2018.1555401; Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," pg 74.

²⁷⁸ Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," pg 74,

²⁷⁹ Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," pg 74.

²⁸⁰ Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," pg 74.

²⁸¹ Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," pg 75.

²⁸² Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," pg 75.

²⁸³ Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," pg 75.

without a clear indication that he was understood. Vladimir's speech becomes "idle discourse," the irony showcasing the limitation of words to be listened to and understood.²⁸⁴ As a unique instance of the characters grappling with the feeling of purposelessness of "Waiting for Godot," Vladimir's metaphysical remarks about the nature of the play are left unheard and unanswered.

Vladimir's "idle discourse" is reminiscent of Sweeney's story of the "girl who got done in."²⁸⁵ In explaining the story, Sweeney is continuously interrupted by Swarts, Snow, and Doris with questions that do not "apply."²⁸⁶ Although Snow assures Sweeney that he is "interested," he interrupts with arguments with Swarts about questions of what happened to the "man."²⁸⁷ Doris, worried about the omens of the coffin card, tells Sweeney she does not "care" for his story.²⁸⁸ Constantly interrupted with meaningless questions, Sweeney grapples with being heard and understood. Ultimately, Sweeney decides that his words mean "nothing" and that "understand[ing]" means "nothing" too.²⁸⁹ With his words becoming "idle discourse," Sweeney resigns to continue drinking, signing, and paying rent, just as Vladimir resigns to wait for Godot.²⁹⁰

Purpose of Theater

*"We should do better if, instead of worrying about the place of drama in society, we simply decided what amused us. What is the purpose of the theatre except to amuse?"*²⁹¹

²⁸⁴ Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," pg 74.

²⁸⁵ Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," pg 74; T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 152.

²⁸⁶ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 152.

²⁸⁷ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 152-153.

²⁸⁸ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 152-153.

²⁸⁹ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 152-153.

²⁹⁰ T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama," pg 153; Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," pg 74.

²⁹¹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pg. 44.

Although unfinished, the themes present in the fragments of Eliot's "Sweeney Agonistes" linger ghost-like in Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," in some instances, bringing back elements of Sweeney himself. Yet, in comparing one of Beckett's great works to a fragment of one of Eliot's least remarked words, it is crucial to announce the differences between Eliot and Beckett as playwrights. De Villiers makes this remarkable distinction in his conclusion through Eliot's perspective on horror and laughter:

"To those who have experienced the full horror of life, tragedy is still inadequate [...] In the end, horror and laughter may be one – only when horror and laughter have become as horrible and as laughable as they can be [...] then only do you perceive the aim of the comic and the tragic dramatists is the same: they are equally serious [for] there is potential comedy in Sophocles and potential tragedy in Aristophanes, and otherwise they would not be such good tragedians or comedians as they are."²⁹²

Here, Eliot unites the aims of tragedians and comedians, where both at one point have the potential to become the other. Eliot's "Sweeney Agonistes" is an "Aristophanic Melodrama" with intentions to be both tragic and comedic. To do so, Eliot added contemporary elements of entertainment - Jazz and the Music Hall - to tragic modernist themes. However, Eliot's constraints lend his "Sweeney Agonistes" to fall short of entertainment.²⁹³ Eliot's failure showcases Beckett's most prominent success in "Waiting for Godot." The most distinct difference between the two plays lies not in technique or theme but in delivery. Like all of Beckett's work, humor allows his characters to succeed in connecting with their audience, rounding out tragic themes of suffering with absurd humor. "Waiting for Godot" is trapped in time, and the abysmal "waiting" that is the play's essence is supplemented by how uniquely

²⁹² Rick de Villiers, 'Of the Same Species': T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot," pg 19.

²⁹³ See Rick de Villiers, 'Of the Same Species': T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot," pg 19; see Khaghany 24 for Eliot's "failure."

human and comedic his characters persist to be.²⁹⁴ Both playwrights leave their characters in timeless worlds, but only Beckett provides them with endless humor while they wait.

Conclusion: Semper Idem

*(The lengthened shadow of a man
Is history, said Emerson
Who had not seen the silhouette
Of Sweeney straddled in the sun.)*²⁹⁵

In his article, “Emerson’s ‘Self Reliance,’ Sweeney, and Prufrock,” Robert G Cook explains Eliot’s allusion to Emerson’s “Self Reliance” in “Sweeney Erect”: “Emerson spoke of his Luthers and Caesars, not realizing that the Sweeney’s too cast their shadows.”²⁹⁶ Eliot made Sweeney with a lasting presence, his “shadow,” that is cast along the length of Eliot’s poetic career, his earliest drama, “Sweeney Agonistes,” and first dramatic success, “Murder in the Cathedral.”²⁹⁷ Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot,” has also felt the effects of Eliot’s lasting character.

The phrase *semper idem* - always the same - is often applied to the study and understanding of Senecan Tragedy.²⁹⁸ Many of Seneca’s tragic characters are rewritten from Greek myth; thus, their fate precedes them. His characters are aware of their grander placement in the world of myth: in *Medea*, Medea announces that she becomes herself - *Medea Nunc Sum* -

²⁹⁴ See Rick de Villiers, ‘Of the Same Species’: T. S. Eliot’s Sweeney Agonistes and Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot,” pg 19;

²⁹⁵ T. S. Eliot “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service,” In *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*, by Thomas Stearns Eliot, pg 48, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980.

²⁹⁶ Robert G Cook, “Emerson’s ‘Self-Reliance,’ Sweeney, and Prufrock,” *American Literature* 42, no. 2 (1970): pg 226, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2924278>, accessed March 31, 2024.

²⁹⁷ T. S. Eliot “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service,” pg 48.

²⁹⁸ A. J Boyle., ed. 1983a, *Seneca Tragicus: Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama*. Berwick: Aureal, pg 200-201.

when her fate is sealed with the murder of her children.²⁹⁹ Famous mythological characters like Medea and Agamemnon can be rewritten in different voices but always return to their same fate because of the deep shadow their stories cast on literary history.³⁰⁰ Thus, this same terminology can be applied to Sweeney, an Irish mythological character who consistently reemerges in the 20th century.

Beyond the works of T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett are Austin Clarke's "The Bright Temptation," Flann O'Brien's "At Swim Two Birds," and most recently, Seamus Heaney's "Sweeney Astray," which have taken up the retelling of the Irish mythological figure.³⁰¹ *Buile Suibhne* has served as the major inspiration for these works, as Sweeney's epic transformation and mirrored fate provide similar techniques that are used when rewriting characters of classical myth.³⁰² As Sweeney is rewritten, he takes on different voices.³⁰³ Austin Clarke mainly incorporates sections of *Buile Suibhne*'s flight in order to add to his novel about an escaped student.³⁰⁴ "At Swim Two Birds" relies on Sweeney's mad transformation to craft him as the novel's metaphysical character who attempts to free himself of his author. Heaney's "Sweeney Astray" was criticized by Ciaran Carson for including "twentieth-century angst" unprompted by the original myth.³⁰⁵ Thus, it is not only important to study Sweeney's origins in myth but how he reemerges in the 20th century.

Although Sweeney is abandoned in Eliot's poetry and drama, the continual study of Sweeney's life, death, and after-death is necessary to understand the legacy of Sweeney's

²⁹⁹ Helen Slaney, (2019), *Seneca: Medea*, London, pg 79, accessed as an Ebook.

³⁰⁰ A. J. Boyle., ed. 1983a, *Seneca Tragicus: Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama*. Berwick: Aural, pg 200-201.

³⁰¹ Dennell M. Downum, "Apeneck Sweeney's Penitential Path."

³⁰² Dennell M. Downum, "Apeneck Sweeney's Penitential Path."

³⁰³ Anne Clune "Mythologising Sweeney." *Irish University Review* 26, no. 1 (1996): pg 48-49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25484648>.

³⁰⁴ Anne Clune "Mythologising Sweeney," pg 48-49.

³⁰⁵ Anne Clune "Mythologising Sweeney," pg 48-49.

mythology. Sweeney's importance in his death and after-death is like those of the Senecan Tragic Heros that preceded him: he *always will be* a shadow cast on the modernist and postmodernist literary canon.

Use Words When You Speak to Me
After *Sweeney Astray* and “Sweeney Agonistes”

The sunset harp sings the praise of its holder
and of the lone dove, in a fit of grief, who had gone astray.
Cursed to the trees and banished to branches.
When you return your lips to the song,
I say to you, use words when you speak to me.

The dove and the man are the same,
pierced in the heart with the same broken spear
of *jagged hawthorne*, prickled fate.
When you play me their story through locked hands,
I say to you, use words when you speak to me.

The heavy-headed human suffers his neck;
plumbed limbs flutter, shed, and fall at the dip
of his author's hand in black fortune.
When you bring him back again *semper idem*,
I say to you, use words when you speak to me.

Eire grieves for him, raving madman, and so
you ask, “Please, God, take his body in full,
so I can expect *to be with him in heaven*.”
When you pray on thrashed knees but opened hands
I say to you, use words when you speak to me.

Her earth is beaten rocks gone soft from years of stepping
and she doesn't cry, not like you do
when you tell me a story of a man without a home,
a circling dove *until time dies away*.
He says to you, speak for me. I say to you, sing.

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