

ANALYSIS

“Sweeney Among the Nightingales” (1918)

T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

“In ‘Sweeney Among the Nightingales’—in which Eliot sought to create a sense of foreboding—Sweeney is threatened by death. From the beginning Sweeney is conceived as the ape man. Here as he laughs he projects suggestions of his animal relationship. In this poem (1918) an attempt to seduce Sweeney in a cafe or public house is put into a framework that suggests the Agamemnon story, which provides the epigraph, his mortal cry, ‘Ay me! I am smitten with a mortal blow!’

Sweeney, at first neither alert nor collected, rouses to danger and departs, but does not escape the net, for he leaves in the shadow of Agamemnon. Whether inebriated or merely sleepy, Sweeney’s emergence from the yawning, dangerously relaxed state describes the turn in the poem which ironically culminates in disaster. This irony is marked by his passage from uncollected laughter to the collected grin, circumscribed by wisteria. Sweeney sprawls, gapes, is silent and heavy-eyed, until the bait of the fruit makes him ‘contract’ and become alert. His refusal to take this sacrificial pawn reveals the change in his state of mind. The actions of the lady in the Spanish cape and the ‘murderous paws’ of Rachel together spell out his danger. The agent of his fate is of course the ‘someone indistinct’ with whom the host converses apart.

But the mounting tension of the poem is best observed in the symbolic imagery. After suggesting the animal character of Sweeney, the poem uses astronomical symbols to suggest the time, place, and portent of the situation. The constellations have ominous mythological associations, particularly of disaster at the hands of women. Sweeney keeps watch at the ‘horned gate’ of death through lechery, the fate of the hunter Orion. Besides being associated with the Agamemnon story, the nightingale has its own bloody tale of betrayal, which Eliot uses elsewhere; and this reinforces the association with the Sacred Heart and the bloody wood. The blood imagery emerges with the fruit offering, for its color runs from the grapes through the wisteria and the Sacred Heart to the bloody wood, providing the inevitable dye for Sweeney. The ‘liquid siftings’ of the nightingales—suggestive of the women—provide a final, ironic but appropriate, strain for a tawdry tale.

Most readers feel a lift in the poem when the nightingales’ singing is translated into the past ‘sang,’ for this shift brings the shuddering realization of Sweeney’s connection with the ancient story. This juxtaposition also provides an implicit comment on both stories, marked by the ambiguous development of ‘liquid siftings,’ which pass from song to strain. Likewise the startling shift from the Sacred Heart to the bloody wood thrusts Sweeney’s betrayal into an opposite moral context. The full import of Eliot’s framework, by a characteristic device, now comes home, and it seems to be a little more than his avowed intention to create a sense of foreboding, a sense which he has given more abundantly to *Sweeney Agonistes*.”

George Williamson

A Reader’s Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem by Poem Analysis
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1953) 97-99

“One of several Eliot poems involving the character of Sweeney, an ‘ape-necked’ symbol of unthinking modern materialism. The epigraph from Aeschylus (‘Alas, I have been smitten deep with a mortal blow’) suggests the tragedy of Agamemnon’s death and establishes the motif of archetypal murder and lust. Sweeney is observed in a bawdy-house; all the persons present are vulgar and sensual, concerned only with their immediate physical desires. They are unaware of the wider and more sublime existence around them, mentioned in sections 2, 3, 9 and 10. Sweeney himself ‘guards the horned gate’—i.e., blocks the messages from the dead (traditions of the past) which might help him and his companions to escape from their plight.

The rhythms of nature (the stars, etc.), the ecstatic experience of religion (the nearby convent), and the ever-present tragedy of Agamemnon are close at hand, even in our modern life; but Sweeney and his kind are insensitive toward them. Eliot here pleads for a renewed contact with tradition and with the spiritual forces of human experience, the means by which mankind can rise again to sublimity.” A variant interpretation of the poem compares Agamemnon’s death with a sordid and evil plot prepared against Sweeney by Rachel, the lady in the Spanish cape, and ‘someone indistinct’ with whom the host converses. In either case the basic contrast is that between tradition and sublimity on one hand and contemporary banality on the other.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 485

Michael Hollister (2015)