

An Interpretation of the Modern World Through W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919) and T. S. Eliot's "Sweeney Erect" (1919)

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To cite this article:

Ashti Anwar Muhammed. An Interpretation of the Modern World Through W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919) and T. S. Eliot's "Sweeney Erect" (1919). *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 3, No. 6, 2015, pp. 142-145. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20150306.13

Abstract: This research deals with the modern world and the literary and nonliterary influences that shaped the world in the twentieth century. These influenced the two outstanding poets to write their well known-poems, especially Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919) and Eliot's "Sweeney Erect" (1919), furthermore; it deals with the strong connection between the two poets and their two interlinked poems. It is also a critical reading about W. B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" (1919), and the destructive world of after the first world war is delineated and the behaviour and attitudes of the modern man in the twentieth society is pinpointed. T. S. Eliot's poem, "Sweeney Erect" (1919), is critically interpreted in detail. Moreover, the infidelity, hypocrisy of modern man in the modern world and the absurdity of the modern life is presented throughout the poem. Finally, the research consists of the findings in which the researcher believes that there is a strong connection between the two poems as the to show the life of the modern man which is not harmonious, and people become senseless about the crisis of the human being that is why Yeats thinks that it is the time for the second coming of Christ to come and teach them about their sordid and absurd life and finally there would be the references.

Keywords: Modern World and Modern Poets, Yeats and Eliot

1. Introduction

It might be necessary to say something about the modern world before dealing with each of these two meaningful poems, (Batra, 2001, 3). Woolf stated that in 1910, everything has started to change, even the behaviour and attitudes of the servants with their masters. This change reflected on the life of the modern people. The world wars also negatively affected many people, so many human beings in this period became secular as they believed that if God exists He should not let the innocent people be killed every day. These two poets, Yeats and Eliot, on the contrary, they became spiritual and they started writing in the spiritual field. There are many literary figures who wrote about the modern world and the modern man crisis in one way or another, but W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot were able to delineate all the aspects of the modern life to highlight the aftermath of the world war I, in a very brilliant yet poetic way in several of their poems, but in this piece of research, the researcher focus on Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919) and Eliot's "Sweeney Erect" (1919), due to the strong link between, on

one hand, the period the two poems written and on the other hand, because of the connection that can be seen between the two poems identical themes. There are two reasons behind their writing of these two poems in the same identical ways, indirectly. The influence of the modern world and the changes in the behaviour of modern people is perhaps one of the reasons behind it. The second reason behind it, which influenced them dealing with the same subject, is the influence of Ezra Pound, who continuously encouraged many of the modern poets to refine the way they write, moreover; his influence is obviously seen on Eliot's writings and Yeats's.

2. Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919)

Dean states that "The Second Coming" is one of the classics of the twentieth century. The poet mainly derives the poem's power from "metaphor". There may not be anyone who is not moved by the strong images used in the poem in the anarchy that will not only lead to "The Second Coming" but also to the coming of "Rough Beasts", (qt in Nathan) Nathan more specifically points out that the poem is the

aftermath of the world war and the "Balfour Declaration" in the first line of his poem Yeats noticed the "Scientific, democratic, fact accumulating heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not to the continuation of itself but the revelation of as in a lightening flash ... of the civilization that must slowly take its place", (Nathan, 1995: 161). Raghu's understanding of the "Rough Beast" sounds much more logical, as, he in his argument states that it is impossible for the beast to be both mother and father. His clue for this is that the poet mentions a head of a man and a body of a lion not lioness, therefore; it is more reasonable to say it is a male or father than the female, the mother. He also believes that the two ending lines is not a statement but it is rather a question and rendered his poem ambiguous as the physical being of the creature is doubtless but the place of birth is unknown, the place which is associated with the coming of Christ is Bethlehem, the poet alludes to Bible as quoted in Raghu, (Mat: 24.3-44, Mark 13.3-37, Luke: 21.7-37 and Revelation: 6.12-17)

Edward Proffitt believes that Yeats's "The Second Coming" is so rich that can be paraphrased in various ways. He considers the end of the poem mysterious as he is actually doubtful of the reference: "Rough Beast". Who does this phrase belong to? Is it Christ or someone else? It could not be Christ as he was born before this time. Was he meant "Sphinx" by it? Some people think that he means a father and a mother as it has a lion body and the man's head. The beast might have been born physically in the desert and to be born spiritually in Bethlehem, which is regarded as a weak possibility. Wheeler does not want to say anything about it and A. M. Gibbs is close to its meaning and he gives a sexual connotation to the meaning of it. Edward concludes his writing by pointing out that Yeats's writing makes sense and once it its readers comprehend it completely they would highly appreciate it, (166). Graham Matrin is in the viewpoint that the symbolism of Yeats's "The Second Coming" is obscure and vague, (230), on the contrary, Harisson points out that the poem could be interpreted to be anything but not obscure symbolism except in some sense, (362), and on the other hand, Stallworthy, asserts that there will not be any occult and mysticism around the falcon bird symbol when knowing that the bird is originally is "hawk" as some other connotations suggest that the poet substitutes it and does not want it to be a "gloomy bird of prey", (18, qtd in Harisson). Mazarro declares that Blackmur has given enough "explication" on the falcon in "The Second Coming" and it has been given two implications: the circular flight of the falcon is likened to the turning of gyre which is a symbol in Yeats's poem to mean intellectual people, or it could be a symbol of the chaos and relate to the sphinx mentioned in the poem, (Mazarro: 1957/1958, 0). Ferber Michael delves deep into the meaning of the poem in a method that he says if "The Second Coming" was written in French, its readers would have called it an allusion to a French sonnet, entitled "Defica" by Nerval. In his poem Nerval is presenting two phases of culture: the "classical and the Christian" even perhaps the third one is expected which is symbolized by a dragon. Arthur Symon the writer of "The Symbolist Movement

in Literature" was influenced by Nerval and dedicated his work to Yeats. Both Yeats and Arthur allude to Nerval's sonnets or at least quote from them, (Ferber, 2008: 233-235).

It is obvious that Yeats always strives to believe in some real historical epochs such as the idea of the return of Christ at the end of the world. He is like a religious preacher finds the solution to the problem of humanity in their return to God. The idea of Christ's return is ubiquitous, i.e, it is mentioned in the Bible (Luke 21:25-36) and Al-Qur'an (Surah Zukhruf, 43:61). Both sources have mentioned Jesus's second coming to encourage human to have faith in God and not to be doubtful of the end of the world. It is also clear that because the time that he has written the poem is the aftermath of the World War One, people remained sad and desperate and even many people became secular and did not believe in the existence of God. Now he is prophesizing the second coming of Christ, to warn people in their attitudes which makes "The falcon cannot hear the falconer" (1). If the modern people do not change themselves and do not behave in a better way, then it will lead to the second coming of Christ which is almost near to the end of this chaotic and anarchic world that many people have lost themselves in terms of social, spiritual and religious aspects of life.

3. Eliot's "Sweeney Erect" (1919)

Eliot always strives to show all the aspects of modern people in his poems. His delineation of the modern society and the modern people is thought to be complex to understand, for instance, in his poem, "Sweeney Erect" (1919), he highlights one of those things that people possess, which is human desire and lust. Southam states that Eliot thought that the name, Sweeney, who appears in many of his poems was a pugilist man in his younger age, and mildly successful, then he became old and he became an innkeeper, (Southam, 1963: 53). According to many critics, the poem has a sensual meaning. Jain Manju, for instance, asserts that Sweeney is a name which appears in many poems of Eliot and it has a symbol of "natural and sensual man", (Jain, 1991: 3). This name perhaps originates from a boxing trainer from whom the poet has taken boxing lessons in Boston. Another possibility for this name is Sweeney Todd, a barber in London, famous for cutting his victims' throats during shaving them, (Jain, 1991: 103). Eliot in one of his letters (363), confessed that the poem was meant to be "an intensely serious" one though it contains funny elements, (qt in Perryman, 244). Perryman and Jain similarly think that the poem could be directly linked to Emerson's *naivete*, the poet might have not been able to write his poem without being aware of what Ronald Bush named "the pressures of American Idealism", (Perryman, 2006: 932 and Jain, 1991: 103). Perryman sates that Southam clarifies that the title of the poem is a reference to Emerson's comment in his well known essay, "Self Reliance" (93), in which he is searching for his power in himself and elsewhere, ... and so perceiving throws himself undoubtedly on his thought, instantly rights himself standing in the erect position ...

works miracles", (qt in Perryman). After World War One, Eliot doubts man's confidence and insisted on the belief in an authoritative power outside the self, (Perryman, 2006: 244). Sweeney might be Prufrock, who is old as Eliot's poems can be interpreted as a life span of a character in search of his soul and spiritual aspect. When Sweeney was young, he was a disloyal lover with her beloved, because he has neglected her after having his pleasure with her. Sweeney might not be criticized for his action with the lady in the poem, as the lady might be a prostitute, and the prostitutes' love making is not linked to passion, love and loyalty, moreover; that could be only a source of income for her and it may be hard for her to bound to one person. If all what is assumed of the doubtful connection of Sweeney and the lady is not true, then one might be able to say Sweeney is Prufrock who is old and cannot eat a peach and laments of being old. This for Sweeney, can be regarded as a punishment for his infidelity with the lady, as, he is now old and cannot have the same relation with the ladies, but he only wishes for.

It might be essential to take a close look at what G.W. Singer (The Explicator, 34, item 7), writes on "Sweeney Erect"'s epigraph, which Eliot alludes to, (qt in Walcutt, 1976). To show the degree of intensity of the twentieth century human being sadness, hopelessness and desolation, the poet brings two stories of lovers in the past, Aspatia's telling her servants to weave a dismal "background into the tapestry" is to empathise for the lady, Ariadne, who was a left by her lover. Eliot moves from one sad image to another one to delineate the image of the sad lover of his poem, (Walcutt, 1976). Perryman, asserts that the poem starts with a lost love or innocence. Ariadne, in Greek mythology that Eliot alludes to, lost her beloved Theseus. In the first ten lines of the poem the poet indirectly and subtly alludes to Theseus and Odysseus, which is seen through the mention of the two heroes of disappointingly unsuccessful lovers: Ariadne and Nausicaa. The reader is reminded of the disloyalty of the lovers for instance, Ariadne was abandoned by her lover, Theseus after she had helped him escape the labyrinth. Eventually, committing suicide out of her excessive despair. In the same way Nausicaa helped Odysseus, when he returned home, but her being generous was not realized. Eliot's mention of Theseus and Odysseus is not to praise them as heroes but it is to highlight their weak points and to say that always human being is prone to "self-interest and frailty", even though those heroes most honoured by "tradition". It implies that Emerson's values are not expected and unusual with the Western civilization aesthetic values, (Perryman, 2006: 244). Similar to Ariadne and Aspatia who were abandoned by their lovers, the girl, in the poem, is also abandoned by Sweeney. She has a bad temper in the poem probably because Sweeney had impolitely forced her in the morning or because he has had his pleasure and left her frustrated. The reaction of the ladies of the corridor to the "clamour with lower-class prudery": might defame the place and the establishment might be a prostitute house. Walcutt rejects the house to be a prostitute house, as he says that it is a kind of place where Doris, Dusty and Klipstein were

found. That is Dorothy Parker's idea when he wrote "Ladies of the Corridor" (Walcutt, 1976:31).

It is very obvious that Eliot brilliantly out of the image of the human being of the previous eras, Aspatia and Ariadne, two female characters abandoned by their lovers, could portray the image of the modern people which is a compression image and the sadness of the lady that Sweeney leaves in the poem, is probably not as deep as the sadness of the poet because in the past people were making rumour and spread this evil relation between a couple of lovers who were abandoned and this will have given them much pain than in the modern period humans are very busy and immersed into the materialistic world as well as they do not have strong social relations with each other this will make the modern lovers be even more disloyal as they can easily forget the sad stories which they confront daily. Eliot for the modern lover's case brings an example which is good to alleviate her pain and sadness. This will enable her to remind herself of what had occurred in the past, i.e., she strives to neglect her pain by thinking of the previous sad stories of the ladies that Eliot alludes to. It could also imply that the lady is quite sad and desperate because of her lover's betrayal, the poet, brings some similar ladies with the same problem to normalise her behaviour and no longer be the cause of hurting for her. Sweeney is a selfish, lusty and brutal character who does not care about the other people's feeling and emotion. There is no marriage between any of those abandoned ladies as marriage bond can be regarded as a chain for the lovers. Modern human relations are sordid and meaningless it does not have any value any more.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, both W. B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, as two delicate modern human beings strive hard to present the modern problems of human being in the twentieth century. Yeats's poem, "The Second Coming", could be indirectly linked to Eliot's poem, "Sweeney Erects" because it seems that Eliot finds a problem that might have been considered personal, in the past, only, but in the twentieth century it is a general one, which is the disloyalty of partners and their behaviour is like machine's and they have lost their sense of humanity. Yeats's delineation of the modern world, one may say, starts from here, when he sees that life does not have meaning, people stick to a materialistic world and their values is based upon the fortune they possess, furthermore; the majority think that they live in a Godless universe and do not have faith and belief in God as a Supreme Power and Almighty as they are really unaware and even numbed themselves about the God's Power and Patience, which makes Him different from human beings, i.e, to react very soon to the evil doing and committing sin. It encourages the poet to write the poem and give value to an abstract and a spiritual aspect of life because he believed that it is easy for any person to be engaged in the trivial worldly affairs but what is difficult for them to do is to become faithful and loyal. The poet even tries to frighten them of the culmination of what they are busy with because

thinks that only fear may affect them to change. As the two poets find solution for the problems of humanity and mostly is regarded as abstract that is why many critics without adequate information on religion, they consider their poems difficult and mystical.

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