

## So Much Depends Upon a Cup of Coffee: A Reader Response Analysis of Eliot's "Sweeney among the Nightingales"

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### Abstract

*T.S. Eliot's poem "Sweeney among the Nightingales" is a short dramatic monologue that introduces Sweeney as rude and cruel character, in a setting where he interacts with several women referred to as 'Nightingales' in a brothel. Sweeney finds himself involved in a cunning plot in that brothel. He is seduced and given alcohol to impair his judgement. To thwart the conspiracy against him, he has to have a cup of coffee to help him remain awake. By having one of the women drop the cup of coffee, Eliot paves the way for unconventional reading of the text that focuses on the unmentioned spilled coffee in the poem. The unmentioned spilled coffee becomes more important than the cup of coffee dropped by the woman in the Spanish cape. For the absence of coffee at the end of Sweeney's late night activities deters his sobriety; helps the conspirators to attain their goal, and further contributes to the theme(s) of the poem.*

**Keywords:** *Eliot; Sweeney, Coffee, Nightingales, Conspiracy, Reader Response.*

### Introduction

T.S. Eliot's "Sweeney among the Nightingales" offers a bleak and fragmented view of modern life through its main character, Sweeney. Set in a brothel-like setting, the poem juxtaposes low human behavior with classical, sublime allusions, to shed light on themes of decay, alienation and betrayal. Sweeney, with his cruel, animalistic qualities, represents the moral decay of modern society. Written in 1918, the poem belongs to a period when Eliot was increasingly preoccupied with the collapse of traditional values and the futility of human endeavor in the post-World War I era.

The tension between high culture and the sordid realities of contemporary life is at the heart of "Sweeney among the Nightingales". Eliot's use of classical allusions, especially to the myths of Agamemnon and the nightingale are meant to emphasize the contrast between the splendor of the past and the degraded present. Nightingales, traditionally associated with beauty and sadness, sing incongruously in the background of Sweeney's wicked activities, highlighting the divide between culture and the human condition in modern times.

One of the poem's strongest aspects lurks in its capacity through the articulated and the unarticulated to conjure a sense of foreboding without explicitly naming Sweeney's fate. Owing to Eliot's minimal and fragmented style, the seemingly insignificant details of the narrative, such as the dropped coffee cup, take on deeper symbolic meanings and serve as a metaphor for Sweeney's loss of control and impending doom. Joanna Gill's analysis of Eliot's work reminds us that Eliot's approach is deeply impersonal. As she notes, Eliot believed in "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" in art (Gill, 2003, p. 49). Yet, in "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," Eliot subtly invites the reader to find personal meaning in what might seem like a mundane accident. The dropped coffee cup can be seen as a reflection of Sweeney's inner turmoil, even if Eliot himself avoids directly expressing emotion. This is where the reader becomes crucial in constructing the deeper significance of the event. Eliot provides the raw details, but it is the reader who turns the spill into a symbol of impending doom.

Gill points out how Eliot's works often create a space for ambiguity, allowing us to question what we're seeing. She observes that Eliot's poetry "undermines binary logic" (p. 39), and this is particularly relevant to how we interpret the dropped coffee cup. Is it merely a slip of the hand, or is it something more? Does it signal a moment of vulnerability for Sweeney, a man who otherwise seems to dominate the sordid world

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he inhabits? The cup falling to the floor might seem small, but it becomes a turning point—a symbol of the fragility that underlies Sweeney’s hardened exterior.

## Method

Drawing on the basic tenets of Reader Response theory, this paper examines how readers become active participants in shaping the meaning of “Sweeney Among the Nightingales.” Scholars such as Michel Foucault (2005), Roland Barthes (1975), Norman Holland (1975) and Stanley Fish (2003) among many others have emphasized that meaning is not something rigidly fixed in the text. Instead, it emerges through the reader’s interaction with the text. This approach becomes particularly helpful when we focus on the overturned “coffee-cup” incident involving Sweeney and “The person in the Spanish cape” (Eliot, 2006, p. 2293).

Barthes (1975) emphasized that the real pleasure of reading does not come from passively absorbing the meaning, but rather from the reader’s active construction of the meaning. “Sweeney among the Nightingales” offers a perfect stage for this, inviting us to make sense of small, seemingly unimportant details, like the dropped cup of coffee. At first glance, the fall of the coffee cup seems trivial, but when we engage with the text, we uncover a deeper, almost conspiratorial significance that adds layers to the story. As Barthes put it, “the birth of the reader must come at the price of the death of the Author” (p. 148), meaning that the reader, not the poet, ultimately crafts the meaning of the poem.

Building on this, Norman Holland’s (1975) psychological approach to Reader Response theory suggests that readers project their personal experiences onto the text. In the poem, this is particularly relevant when we consider the coffee cup. Readers may bring their own emotions, perhaps feelings of control, vulnerability, or betrayal, into this scene, which turns what might seem like a small accident into a symbol of much larger consequences.

With his ‘interpretive communities’ where readers who share similar cultural or social backgrounds come to similar readings and conclusions, Stanley Fish (2003) expands on the significance of the role of the reader in generating meaning. Eliot’s poem is a good example of how readers of different orientations and perspectives may generate various readings of the coffee-cup incident. One group of readers for instance may interpret the spilled coffee as an unfortunate accident, while another may view it as a deliberate act of sabotage, a key part of the conspiracy revealed in the poem. Fish’s idea of interpretive communities explains how different groups of readers can derive such different meanings from the same text based on their own experiences and shared assumptions. Similar ideas are echoed by Harker (1994) who accentuates the agency of the reader in the construction of meaning through bringing symbols and narrative gaps together to create a coherent interpretation. Likewise, Gerald Prince (1988) has pointed out that what is left unsaid or unnarrated in a story can often be as important as what is directly narrated.

In “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” Eliot leaves out certain details—like Sweeney’s drinking habits or the full atmosphere of the setting—inviting us as readers to fill in those gaps. This technique not only enhances the poem’s tension but also encourages us to be more personally involved in how the narrative unfolds. In particular, Prince’s concept of the “interpretative context” (1988, p. 7) highlights how the significance of the coffee cup, seemingly a minor detail, grows in importance through its interpretative potential. The omission of further details surrounding the event, such as whether Sweeney intended to drink the coffee to stay awake or merely to sober up, or whether the coffee cup was full or empty, opens the text to multiple readings. As readers, we are invited to contemplate the significance of this omission, using it as a tool to understand Sweeney’s deteriorating situation and how it reflects broader existential concerns within the poem.

Drawing from the insights of Foucault (2005) on how discourses are structured by underlying power dynamics, the paper will explore how the power relations between Sweeney and the women in the poem are hinted at through small, seemingly insignificant actions like the spilling of the coffee. The deliberate nature of this act, though not fully narrated, allows for a rich field of interpretation when viewed through a Foucauldian perspective. Foucault’s exploration of how narratives reflect societal power structures opens

up the possibility that the coffee cup incident symbolizes a deeper power play between Sweeney and the women conspiring against him.

Further, as explored by Alcorn (1994), Reader Response theory reflects the dynamic relationship between text and reader, with textual rhetoric influencing readers' perceptions. He argues that meaning is not fixed but emerges through the tension between the text's signifiers and the reader's subjective experience (Alcorn, 1994, p. 63). In the case of Sweeney, the coffee cup acts as a rhetorical device, guiding the reader to interpret the character's vulnerability and the broader thematic implications of the narrative. Furthermore, Mary Louise Pratt (1982) highlights the centrality of interpretive strategies, noting that they allow readers to construct meaning from the social and textual environment of the narrative. Pratt's discussion of "interpretive communities" resonates with Fish's theory, illustrating how readers bring their own assumptions and cultural understandings to their readings (Pratt, 1982, p. 201). It is through these theoretical perspectives, that the significance of the coffee cup and its unnarrated implications is analyzed in-depth. In this respect, the readers, guided by their individual interpretive strategies, become co-creators of meaning, transforming this small moment into a critical narrative juncture that determines Sweeney's fate.

## Literature Review

T.S. Eliot's "Sweeney among the Nightingales" has been scrutinized by many critics over the years, with nearly every aspect of the poem receiving attention. One such critic, Jeffrey Blevins (2017), interprets Sweeney as Eliot's attempt to explore the tension between atomism and absolutism. In his analysis, Blevins focuses on the dismemberment of Sweeney's body parts, particularly in the scene where the person in the Spanish cape tries to sit on Sweeney's knees. Blevins argues that this failure represents Sweeney's inability to hold himself together, both literally and figuratively, as his body is metaphorically "dismantled" by Eliot's language. This fragmentation aligns with Sweeney's broader role in Eliot's work as a representation of chaotic modern life, a character whose body is often portrayed as a collection of disconnected parts (Blevins, 2017, p. 108). However, this reading can be contrasted with the view that the incident with the coffee cup and the woman in the Spanish cape is not merely symbolic of Sweeney's disintegration, but is instead a deliberate act of conspiracy against him.

Stanley Edgar Hyman (1960) characterizes "Sweeney among the Nightingales" as a "narrative of betrayal by the brute lust of the world" (p. 48), suggesting that the poem presents a view of modern man that is deeply cynical. Sweeney is depicted as a creature of base impulses, surrounded by others who are equally debased. This portrayal aligns with Eliot's broader critique of modernity, where human relationships are reduced to animalistic drives, and betrayal is an inevitable part of human interaction. Hyman argues that Sweeney, with his "ape-like" demeanor, embodies the physical and sensual man, trapped in a sordid world filled with conspirators (Hyman, 1960, p. 44).

Other scholars, such as Mandel (1976) and Gwynn (1953), have similarly interpreted the poem as an illustration of the meanness and debasement of modern life. Mandel sees the nightingales in the poem, traditionally associated with beauty and love, as ironic symbols of the collapse of values in the modern world. He asserts that Eliot uses the image of the nightingale to underscore the contrast between the classical past and the sordid present (Mandel, 1976, p. 127). Likewise, Gwynn (1953) argues that the poem portrays a world where love has degenerated into boredom, with the nightingales serving as a poignant reminder of what has been lost (p. 26).

One area that has not been fully explored by these scholars is the centrality of the spilled coffee to the poem's broader themes. While Hyman, Mandel, and Gwynn have provided valuable insights into the characters and setting of the poem, they have overlooked the symbolic weight of the coffee cup incident. This small but significant detail serves as a turning point in the narrative, marking the moment when Sweeney's fate is sealed. The spilled coffee, in this reading, represents the unraveling of Sweeney's control, both over himself and over the situation. By omitting explicit commentary on this event, Eliot invites readers to actively engage with the text, constructing their own interpretation of its significance.

The works of scholars like Davidson (1966) further support the idea that Sweeney's fate is one of inevitable doom. Davidson highlights the poem's epigraph, which quotes Agamemnon's cry from Aeschylus, suggesting that Sweeney, like Agamemnon, is caught in a tragic cycle of violence and betrayal. The nightingales in the poem, which sang when Agamemnon was murdered, also sing for Sweeney, connecting his fate to that of the ancient king (Davidson, 1966, p. 402). While Davidson interprets Sweeney's fate as tragic, he also notes that the poem's tone is not entirely serious. Sweeney's brutishness, his animal-like qualities, and the sordid setting create a sense of dark humor, even as the poem hints at his impending demise.

In contrast, Blevins offers a more fragmented and existential interpretation of Sweeney's fate. Rather than viewing him as a tragic figure, Blevins sees Sweeney as embodying the disintegration of meaning in the modern world. His body, presented as a collection of disconnected parts, symbolizes the breakdown of coherence and unity in both the individual and society (Blevins, 2017, p. 108).

In conclusion, while Eliot's critics have explored many aspects of "Sweeney among the Nightingales", there remains room for further analysis of the symbolic significance of the spilled coffee and its role in the poem's broader themes of conspiracy and betrayal. By focusing on this overlooked detail, readers can gain a deeper understanding of how Eliot uses subtle, unnarrated moments to shape the fate of his characters and to comment on the disintegration of modern life.

## Results and Discussion

It is taken for granted that in a nightclub or a brothel of the kind where the hirsute and untidy Sweeney was, one expects to read about bottles and glasses falling and crashing on the floor of the premise upon the pulling of a tablecloth. However, in "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," the fact that only a coffee cup is overturned heightens the significance of this small, seemingly inconsequential detail. The dropping of the coffee cup represents more than just a physical accident; it is a deliberate narrative act that shifts the tone of the poem and signals Sweeney's impending doom.

The fallen coffee cup is not just a background prop but rather a central symbol in the narrative, carrying weight in terms of both plot and theme. While critics like Mandel (1976) focus on the larger narrative of debasement and existential despair, the subtlety of the coffee cup brings this grand theme into a personal, almost domestic sphere, where small gestures carry immense significance (Mandel, 1976, p. 127). Similarly, the deliberate fall of the woman and her overturning of the coffee cup underscores the play between control and chaos that permeates the poem. The scene acts as a symbolic microcosm of Sweeney's own loss of control over his surroundings and fate.

Interestingly, Eliot does not specify whether the coffee cup is full or empty, leaving this detail ambiguous. This lack of clarity invites the reader to engage with the poem more actively, embodying the principles of Reader Response theory. As Harker (1994) notes, the ambiguity in texts like Eliot's invites "the reader to construct" meaning through interaction with the text (p. 68). The uncertainty surrounding the state of the cup, whether it was filled with coffee or already emptied, mirrors the instability of Sweeney's world. This omission highlights the fragility of control in Sweeney's life, leaving the reader to wonder whether the cup's fall represents a minor mishap or a metaphorical unraveling of Sweeney's control over his own fate.

Way after midnight, coffee is usually served as an alerting agent in nightclubs and other such places of entertainment. However, the coffee in "Sweeney among the Nightingales" is not a social drink meant for camaraderie but rather a stimulant intended to keep Sweeney awake. The absence of glasses and bottles on Sweeney's table implies that the alcohol has already been consumed, and the coffee is needed to maintain his vigilance as he guards the "horned gate" (Eliot, 2006, p. 2294). Unfortunately, Sweeney's attempt at staying alert is thwarted by the spilled coffee, contributing to his momentary slumber and vulnerability. The spilled coffee thus becomes a tool of conspiracy, depriving Sweeney of the alertness he needs to defend himself.

In contrast to Bernad's (1958) assertion that the coffee holds no significant meaning, the deliberate use of such a mundane object as a narrative device suggests otherwise. Eliot's decision to focus on the coffee cup, rather than the expected bottles of alcohol, aligns with the subtle layers of Eliot's modernist technique. As Pernille Stroebaek (2013) points out, coffee in social situations often facilitates conversation and keeps participants alert, yet here it serves the opposite purpose (p. 383). Instead of heightening Sweeney's awareness, the spilled coffee symbolizes his fall into lethargy and vulnerability, opening him up to the forces conspiring against him.

The episode culminating in the dropping of the coffee cup is marked by the rhythm of the four quoted lines:

The **per**/son **in**/ the **Span**/ish **cape**

**Tries** to/ **sit** on/ **Sweeney**'s/ **knees**

**Slips** and/ **pulls** the/ **table**/ **cloth**

**Ov** er/ **turns** a/ **coff** ee/-**cup**,

(Eliot, 2006, p. 2293, scansion and bold letters indicating stressed syllables are mine.)

Here, we notice irregular and mixed rhythm in action. The iambic tetrameter in the first line, is followed by three lines of trochaic trimeter with irregular catalectic feet. This rhythmic mix-up mimics the situation unfolding in the brothel. The rising beat of the iambic line represents the woman in a standing posture; while the trochaic lines, with their falling beat, mimic her fall, the pulling of the tablecloth, and the spilling/dropping of the coffee cup. The rhythmic irregularity highlights the chaos that ensues, with the coffee cup serving as the focal point of Sweeney's disempowerment.

As Blevins (2017) discusses, Eliot's use of metrical irregularity serves to emphasize moments of narrative and emotional disruption (Blevins, 2017, p. 108). The missing syllable in the final line, which ends with "cup," hides and signifies the spilled coffee, reflecting the incomplete or disjointed nature of Sweeney's consciousness at that moment. This rhythmic disruption is not merely a formal device; it mirrors the disorientation that Sweeney experiences as his grasp on the situation slips away.

The symbolism of the nightingales adds another layer to the significance of the coffee cup incident. Bernad (1958) argues that the nightingales represent a bridge between two worlds—Sweeney's modern, sordid world, and the tragic, heroic world of Agamemnon, whose murder is echoed in the poem's epigraph (p. 393). The nightingales' song acts as a chilling reminder of Sweeney's impending doom, just as the spilled coffee signals his loss of control. These symbolic echoes of betrayal and foreboding reinforce the poem's themes of conspiracy and entrapment. However, Bernad's interpretation of Sweeney being the same as the other men, such as the "man with heavy eyes" or the "silent vertebrate in brown" (p. 384), is questionable. The poem provides clear distinctions between these characters, each serving as a different embodiment of moral degradation. Eliot intentionally fragments the male figures, emphasizing the widespread decay in Sweeney's world, rather than conflating them into one person.

Davidson (1966) similarly explores the connection between Sweeney and Agamemnon, suggesting that while Sweeney's death may not be explicitly narrated, the sense of foreboding created by these symbolic elements, particularly the nightingales and the epigraph, makes his demise inevitable (Davidson, 1966, p. 402). This connection deepens the reader's understanding of the coffee cup incident as part of a larger, inescapable narrative of betrayal. The coffee, in this sense, serves as a modern-day equivalent of the poisoned chalice or the deceptive feast in classical tragedies, a seemingly innocent element with fatal implications.

## Conclusion

Eliot's use of seemingly trivial events, such as the overturning of a coffee cup, to convey larger existential themes is typical of his modernist style. As Hyman notes, "Sweeney among the Nightingales" combines elements of high tragedy with low, sordid details, creating a layered narrative that critiques modern life (Hyman, 1960, p. 48). In this context, the coffee cup functions both as a literal object within the poem and as a symbol of the small but devastating forces that conspire to bring about Sweeney's downfall. The gradual loss of control, signaled by the spilled coffee, mirrors the broader theme of existential despair that permeates much of Eliot's work.

In the poem, the coffee cup incident is not just an ordinary blunder of a woman casually and playfully dallying with a costumer in a brothel. It becomes a significant moment that sums up the poem's themes of control, conspiracy, and disruption of order. Babette Deutsch observes how Eliot's "use of concrete details underscores the atmosphere of sordid intrigue" (Deutsch, 1939, p. 23). What seems on the surface to be a casual accident shows the precarious state of Sweeney's world. Likewise, Kevin Young further stresses this, pointing out that "Sweeney among the Nightingales" is one of Eliot's few works that reflect "the negative aspects of modern civilization" (Young, 2000, p.193). Indeed, the dropped coffee cup is not just about Sweeney's loss of personal control; it is also a symbol of a greater social collapse. This seemingly small, mundane moment summons readers to engage more deeply with the poem's symbolic landscape, challenging readers to find meaning in these fragmented, fleeting details. Through the framework of Reader Response theory, the coffee cup incident in my reading becomes a microcosm of the poem's broader themes of control, betrayal, and existential despair. This theory invites readers to actively engage with the text, constructing meaning from the subtle narrative clues Eliot provides. Ultimately, this small yet significant moment reflects the larger collapse of Sweeney's world, signaling his inevitable defeat and the breakdown of the moral and social values that once held sway. Moreover, the paper demonstrates that Reader Response theory is not merely a subjective reaction to a given text. While the theory relies on the reader's personal interpretations, those interpretations should be grounded in relevant scholarship, resonating directly or indirectly with Fish's concept of interpretive communities.

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