

## The Impact of Sigmund Freud on the poetry of T. S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden



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### **Abstract:**

*The topic sentence may seem either puzzling or bemusing at the first sight, because Sigmund Freud, a psychoanalyst and the modern English poets. T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden find themselves as strange bed-fellows. In fact, it is an attempt to be innovative and interdisciplinary for scholars to find new paths for research activity. Literature is never averse to Psychology. Both the domains coalesce and corroborate each other. One can find excellent examples in literature to buttress this point. When Hamlet thinks of the world as a prison with many confines, wards and dungeons and Denmark being one of the worst, his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not think so. It is then Hamlet says: **There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.** (Shakespeare's Hamlet Act II.sc.2.). Similarly, in Milton's Paradise Lost. Book I, Beelzebub, the Satan is not at all crippled by its defeat to the infernal world of Hell with all its horrors. He has a mind which must not be changed by place or time. So he proclaims: **The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of heaven (254 - 255).** In the backdrop of the observations of Shakespeare and Milton, this article is an attempt to outline the Freudian impact on three illustrious poets of the twentieth century, namely T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and W. H. Auden.*

**Keywords:** *Child sexuality, libidinal urge and the ego; the paranoia of sexual perversion and abnormality; the pleasure principle that dominates in sexual life; the bareness and the sterility of the modern civilization; predilection to sublimate sex and regard it a sacrament.*

**Introduction:** While trying to understand the impact of Sigmund Freud on 20<sup>th</sup> century English literature, we can encapsulate that he was a psychoanalyst who unpacks and unfolds the unconscious conflicts based on the reveries, dreams and fantasies of the patient. His theories on child sexuality, libidinal urge and the ego are some of the most influential academic concepts. Freud also makes the point that people who are behaviourally abnormal are always sexually abnormal, but many people who are normal behaviourally are otherwise sexually abnormal also (1).

He also concluded that a disposition to perversions is an original and universal disposition of the human sexual instinct which does not serve the purposes of reproduction at all, but has its aim, the gaining of particular kinds of pleasure. The forces that can be employed for cultural activities are thus to a great extent obtained through the suppression of what are known as the perverse elements of sexual excitation(2).

In the backdrop of these Freudian concepts, it must be admitted that the major poets of the twentieth century like T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden acknowledge the supremacy of the sex instinct but their predilection is to sublimate or overcome it.

### **Freudian Impact on T. S. Eliot:**

In '*The Waste Land*'(1922), the greatest poem of the twentieth century, Eliot blames sex, or rather its degradation and commercialization, as both the cause and the symptom of the decay of Western civilization. The poem is at once a profoundly moving and an equally distressing. In a word, T.S. Eliot had tried to paint the sterility and the disturbance of the modern world after the First World War. The people were disillusioned in all domains. There was a total pell-mell, spiritual vacuum, loss of faith and moral values, commercialization of life, and the paranoia of sexual perversion and abnormality as postulated by Sigmund Freud.

At one time sex was considered sacramental, a consummation of conjugal love and means of human development. But unfortunately in modern time, sex has become an animal urge with no moral or social commitment. It is perverted and is utilized for erotic pleasure and monetary benefits. It has therefore, become a source of degeneration and disease. It has also led to the erosion of moral values and has turned to be a hurdle in man's spiritual progress. Easy sexual relationship is found among all sections of society both high and low. In the first section of the poem, '*The Burial of the Dead*' Eliot gives two examples of guilty love and the

pain of satisfied love outside the marriage. The poet refers to the story of Tristan who had a guilty passion for Isolde in Wagner's opera Tristan and Isolde

I will show you fear in the handful of dust  
(Fresh blows the wind  
To the homeland  
My Irish child  
Where do you wait? (3) (30- 34)

He also gives another example of guilty love, the story of the hyacinth girl

You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;  
They called me the hyacinth girl"  
Yet when we came back, late from Hyacinth garden,  
Your arms fell, and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.  
Looking into the heart of light, silence  
Od und leer Das Meer  
(Desolate and empty is the sea) (35-41)

Like the love of Tristan, the love of this young man is also a guilty, as he makes love to the girl secretly in the garden. This sort of love is not free from fear and anxiety. The feeling of the lover is summed up in the line "I was neither living nor dead and I knew nothing". So love offers neither joy nor relaxation under the condition of modern life.

"Od und leer Das Meer"  
'Empty and desolate is the sea.'

The poet means that their love is guilty as it is outside marriage. Such guilty love does not give a sense of satisfaction.

### **Sex in high and low society:**

The following quotation in the second section of the poem, '*The game of Chess*' refers to the sexual triviality in high class society.

And we shall play a game of chess  
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for the knock upon at the door. (136-138)

Eliot quotes these lines with reference to Middleton's play 'Women Beware Women'. The game of chess is played with the mother-in-law in order to distract her attention and to enable a lustful duke to seduce her daughter-in-law. The knock upon the door will be a signal that

the love affair should be brought to an end. The moral of the section is that the foundation of healthy society rests on a disciplined sexual relationship. When sex is free from restriction or control, it leads to perversion and creates a sense of frustration and failure in married life.

The perversion of sex prevails among the lower classes of society. Eliot mentions the story of Lil and the sexual violation of three daughters of Thames. Lil is no longer attractive and now she is ugly. Even the cockney lady who talks to her in a pub at closing time (Hurry up please, It's time), comments on Lil's appearance:

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique  
(And her only thirty one) (156- 157)

Lil replies that it was because of abortion bills that she took to get rid of pregnancy. The lady asked Lil why then she married, if she did not want children. Marriage and children go together.

What do you get married for, if you don't want children? (164)

The quotation throws light on the tragedy of Lil who has lost her health and yet is unable to keep her husband around. It reveals perversion of married life where child bearing has to be controlled and at the same time the wife should appear attractive to prevent her husband from mixing with other women.

### **Sex in London:**

The essence of this section of the poem '*The fire Sermon*' is lust that burns up life. According to Lord Buddha's sermon, one can conquer lust by suffering and pain by passing through fire. But this is opposed to the modern idea that sex should be enjoyed without any regulation.

And their friends, loitering heirs of city directors;  
Departed, have left no addresses. (180 – 181)

After a wild party, rich businessmen left no address to their sex partners. For them sex is the same as any other commodity. It could be bought and enjoyed without any sense of morality. The poet calls London, unreal city like Baudelaire called Paris, because unbelievable things happen in that city. Rape, lust, molestation and cheating prevail without any hindrance.

Unreal city  
Under the brown fog of a winter noon  
Mr.Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant  
Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants  
C.i.f.London: documents at sight,  
Asked me in demotic French  
To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel  
Followed by a week-end at the Metropole (207 – 214)

Mr.Eugenides, a merchant from Turkey, though ugly and unshaven, invites the narrator to luncheon at a hotel and to join him for a week-end excursion to Brighton for homosexual relationship. Eliot goes on to give us another instance of mechanical sex relation of a typist girl with the young carbuncular man. She is bored and tired. But the young man like Tereus is full of lust. He sleeps with her and then makes off, leaving her alone to think to herself. 'Well now that's done; I am glad it's over.' The female typist is quite indifferent to his game of lust. She has gone through mechanical sex without any sense of regret. She does not even realize that her lover has departed.

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
Hardly aware of her departed lover; (249 – 250)

The essence of this scene refers to the seduced girl in Goldsmith's 'The Vicar of Wakefield' who is full of shame and repentance. In the past, the loss of chastity was considered worse than death for a girl. But in the modern age, it is a mechanical routine as done by the typist girl.

The last scene of the '*Fire Sermon*' shows some sexual violation experienced by three daughters of Thames. The first daughter was born at Highbury which is full of trams and dusty trees. She visited Richmond Kew, which are picnic spots on the bank of the river Thames. At Richmond she was criminally assaulted by a man while she was lying on her back on the floor of a small boat.

Trams and dusty trees.  
Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew  
Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees  
Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe (292 -295)

The second daughter was ravished at Moorgate.  
My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart

Under my feet. After the event  
He wept. He promised 'a new start'.  
I made no comment. What should I resent? (Lines: 296 – 299)

After the act, he felt repentant and wept. He promised to reform himself. For the girl, there is nothing to regret because rape is a common experience of the poor girl's life.

The third girl was raped on Margate Sands.  
I cannot connect  
Nothing to nothing.  
The broken finger-nails of dirty hands.  
My people humble people who expect  
Nothing (300 – 305)

The poor girl does not remember anything. She compares herself to the broken fingernails of dirty hands which are useless. Poor people could not do anything against such violation. They just accept it as a common experience of life.

Thus Eliot affirms that the bareness and the sterility of the modern civilization are caused by various factors, but firmly believes as an impact of Freudian ideas that sexual deviation gives significant contribution to the problem. Sex has been perverted and is utilized merely to gratify human lust. Sex is also traded for commercial purpose. Eliot sums up story of European lust through the words of St. Augustine:

To Carthage then I came  
Burning burningburningburning  
O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
O Lord Thou pluckest  
Burning (307 – 310)

This is a reference to Augustine's Confessions and Buddha's fire sermon describing the dangers of the youthful lust prevailing everywhere and how the whole of Europe is being destroyed by the hellish fire of sexuality.

### **Freudian Impact on W.B. Yeats:**

For Yeats, the connection between sexuality and mortality lies deeper than their significance in his poetry. In both, the relationship is characterized simultaneously by attraction and repulsion. The disgust that Yeats felt about his bodily decomposition in old age was similarly

endured in youth in reference to his budding sexuality. In '*Sailing to Byzantium*,' it becomes clear that this discomfort with sexuality is reflected in the poem. In the land of sexually charged youth, it is not suitable for old people to live there. An aged man is a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick, because life over there is all physical and sensual. He longs to exist in a place of wisdom, devoid of sex, where he may once again feel at ease.

The opening stanza reveals that the young people enjoy the pleasures of love. Birds, fish and all other creatures lead an animal, physical life which is spent in procreation. All kinds of creatures are born, they indulge in sex, and they procreate and in due course die. They do not lead intellectual and artistic existence.

That is no country for old man. The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees  
These dying generations – at their song.  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies  
Caught in the sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unaging intellect.

The poet longs to exist in a place of wisdom, devoid of sex, where he may once again feel at ease and devote his mind to things of beauty which is a joy for ever in Byzantium.

### **Freudian Impact on W.H. Auden:**

The most important of Freud's theories for Auden was the theory of two primary instincts, love and death, which both struggle with and reinforce one another. In '*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*', Freud had concluded that because it seeks quiescence, the dissipation of libidinal tension, the pleasure principle that dominates in sexual life ultimately serves the death drive. The similarity and proximity of love and death, one of the great topoi of Western literature, surface throughout Auden's work. In the poem '*In September 1, 1939*', the concluding lines are very significant:

May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.

In the early ballad '*As I Walked out One Evening*,' the speaker walks out one evening along Bristol Street. He sees crowds upon the pavement like fields of wheat. Walking by the river he hears a lover sing:

'Love has no ending, and I will love you, dear  
Until China and Africa meet'  
Until the river jumps over the mountain  
And the salmon sing throughout the streets.

I will love you until the ocean  
Is folded and hung up to dry,  
Until the seven stars cry out  
Like geese in the sky.

The years run around like rabbits,  
And in my arms I hold  
'The Flower of the Ages,'  
And the first love of the world.

But the clocks warn the infatuated lover,  
'Time watches from the shadow  
And coughs when you would kiss'.

Similar in this regard is Auden's '*Lullaby*' (1937) which begins jarringly

'Lay your sleeping head, my love,  
Human on my faithless arm...'

Faithlessness reminds us of the mortality that has resulted from original sin.

The elegiac poem '*In Memory of Sigmund Freud*,' written by W. H. Auden speaks abundantly of the influence and impact of Freudian theory with his poetry. In his elegy he links Freud with Dante:

... he went his way  
down among the lost people like Dante, down  
to the stinking fosse where the injured  
lead the ugly life of the rejected ...

This conception of the poet's task as one of recovering the past through a descent to a nocturnal underworld also echoes the end of Auden's Yeats elegy, in which he commands, 'Follow, poet, follow right / To the bottom of the night'-- and again (more faintly) Yeats's own "Circus Animals' Desertion," in which the move from abstract forms to real suffering is

also represented as a descent: 'I must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.' And the comparison of repressed wishes to the shades of the underworld is particularly appropriate in an elegy on Freud, who used the very same analogy in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, writing that repressed wishes 'are not dead in our sense of the word but only like the shades in the Odyssey, which awoke to some sort of life as soon as they had tasted blood.' (4)

## **Conclusion:**

Under the impact of Freud, sexuality which had been a taboo topic, came to the force with all its neurotic and deviant components. The Victorians had treated the beast of sex with a hush-hush incommodiousness. Now the beast is very much "in." So far as English poetry is concerned, the impact of Freud is discernible only here and there. The major poets of the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden also acknowledge the supremacy of the sex instinct but their predilection is to sublimate or overcome it. In *The Waste Land*- the greatest poem of the twentieth century- Eliot blames sex, or rather its degradation and commercialization, as both the cause and the symptom of the decay of Western civilization, wanting like the camel men of *The Journey of the Magi*, their liquor and women. All these modern 20<sup>th</sup> century poets have highlighted the ubiquitous, weird male psyche from childhood to adulthood and the abnormality of an enervated man as well as the sordidness of the perverted modern urban civilization. But there is still the silver lining in the sable cloud. 'This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper'. (5)

## **End Notes:**

1. *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, pp. 562-563 Random House 1938
2. Sigmund Freud: *Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness*, 1908
3. T.S. Eliot: *The Waste Land*
4. Sigmund Freud: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 282.
5. T. S. Eliot: *The Hollow Men*