

T. S. Eliot's *Madame Sosostris* and Aldous Huxley's *Mr. Scogan*

Hamdi Hameed Al-Douri

Department of English, College of Education for Women, University of Garmian

Abstract

There are many affinities between Mr. Scogan, the fake fortune-teller of Aldous Huxley's novel, *Crome Yellow* (1921) and Madame Sosostris, the clairvoyant of T. S. Eliot's outstanding poem *The Waste Land* (1922). Though Eliot had read the novel in 1921 and borrowed one of the main characters of *The Waste Land*, Madame Sosostris from it, this has not been given its due of study. This paper tries to explore the influence of Huxley's novel on Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The paper begins with a prefatory section which sheds light on Eliot's acquaintance with Huxley and his novel. The second section gives a brief idea of *Crome Yellow* and the part played by Mr. Scogan as a fake fortune teller in the novel. The third section explores how Madame Sosostris's disability to foretell the future through the Tarot pack "of cards" is identical with Mr. Scogan's fake fortune-telling though the ends are different. The paper ends with a conclusion which sums up the findings of the study.

I. Aldous Huxley

Aldous Leonard Huxley (1894–1963) was a novelist, short-story writer, poet, playwright, travel writer, biographer, essayist, and critic, becoming one of the most influential English writers of the mid-twentieth century.... He was also a philosopher, mystic, social prophet, political thinker, and world traveler who had a detailed knowledge of music, medicine, science, technology, history, literature, and Eastern religions. Possessing an insatiable curiosity, he wanted to learn everything and try anything (Reiff: 7). He is the grandson of the British biologist Thomas Huxley (1825-1895), and brother of Julian Huxley; educated at Eton College and the University of Oxford. He worked on various periodicals and published four books of verse before the appearance of his first novel, *Crome Yellow* (1921). The novels *Antic Hay* (1923) and *Point Counter Point* (1928), both of which illustrate the nihilistic temper of the 1920s, and *Brave New World* (1932), an ironic vision of a future dystopia, established Huxley's fame. During the 1920s he lived largely in Italy and France. He immigrated to the United States in 1937. Among his more than 45 books are the volumes of essays *Jesting Pilate* (1926), *Ends and Means* (1937), *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1956), *Brave New World Revisited* (1958), and *Literature and Science* (1963). Other novels include *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936), *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939), *Ape and Essence* (1948), and *Island* (1962). Huxley also wrote on science, philosophy, and social criticism. Important nonfiction works include *The Art of Seeing* (1932), *The Perennial Philosophy* (1946), and *The Devils of Loudon* (1952). *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and its sequel *Heaven and Hell* (1956) deal with Huxley's experiences with hallucinogenic drugs (*Encarta*, 2008, DVD).

II. CROME YELLOW

Crome Yellow was Huxley's first novel written in two months while he was in a small village (Forte dei Mami) in Italy with his wife and son in 1921. He wrote to his father in June 1921 "I am working hard on my Peacockian² novel, which I have pledged to finish by the end of July" (Qtd. in Sion: 21). He described his novel as an entertainment and as he wrote to H. L. Mencken, he decided to create "a comic novel" in an "agreeable form" modelled essentially after the English novelist and poet Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866), requiring a "houseful of oddities" (ibid.) and *Crome yellow*, the house, is really full of oddities embodied in some of the idiosyncratic characters of the novel. The novel was published in November 1921.

The setting of the novel is the manor house *Crome Yellow* which is, according to Sion, Reminiscent of the time Huxley himself spent at Garsington Manor (Sion 21). In this novel Huxley brings us to the country estate of Henry and Pricilla Wimbush where Denis Stone, the hero, a twenty-three years old young man, has come as a guest for an extended stay during the hot and humid days of summer. From the very beginning of the novel, he is presented as an aspiring poet who loves words and who is dreaming of writing 'the perfect poem' (Huxley, *Crome Yellow*: 35-36)¹ and has written a 'slim volume' of poems (*CY*: 39) but often fails to find the right ones to fit the mood (Sion: 21). One of *Crome Yellow's* attractions for T. S. Eliot might have been this interest in poetry, literature, words and clairvoyance. However, Denis's worst flaw is his lack of decisive action, to a certain extent, like Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock. The house is filled with guests; Huxley's skillful plot device for bringing an eccentric assembly together under one roof at the same time:

Among the array of eccentrics to weave in and out of the rooms of *Crome*, Denis is the connecting thread—we arrive and depart *Crome* with him. Unfortunately, Denis finds himself often unhappy and miserable, both in his unrequited love for Anne, and his fear of displaying any inadequacy. He often listens to others and fails to express an opinion. He even apologizes when Anne criticizes his tendency to quote others without providing the source or the context. The description of his lengthy contemplation over what to wear displays his superficial desire to ever please the public. Frequently cut short before he is able to answer a question or engage in a conversation... state something meaningful, amusing, or profound, but either misses the opportunity -- as in his overtures of love for Anne -- or is continuously cut short by the overreaching self-centered speech of another. (Sion 23-4)

The gathering consists of a variety of characters; the intelligent, the witty and the dull. Henry Wimbush, the host, who has spent the last thirty years of his life writing a history of the *Chrome* estate. His wife, Priscilla Wimbush, the hostess of *Crome* who is described by Denis as being very masculine (*CY* 40) uses the horoscope to place her wagers on horses and dallies in spirituality. The horoscope, therefore, which is going to be associated with Mr. Scogan in the novel and with Madame Sosostriis, in Eliot's *The Waste Land* is always present in the novel. Mrs. Wimbush says 'You find me busy at my horoscopes' (*CY*; 41) and she asks Dennis: 'Wonderful isn't it? Everything is in the stars. In the Old Days before I had the stars to help me, I used to lose thousands; (*CY*: 41). Most of her days 'were spent in casting the horoscopes of horses, and she invested her money scientifically as the stars dictated' (*CY*: 42). She called her horoscope 'Inman's horoscope' (*CY*: 43).

Here, in the character of Priscilla we have the first introduction of fortune-telling using the horoscope, which will be further embraced by Mr. Scogan in Chapter Twenty Seven and by T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. However, in Chapter Seventeen, we are told that "Priscilla had never seen a vision or succeeded in establishing any communication with the Spirit World. She had to be content with the reported experience of others" (CY: 144) and using the horoscope to place her wagers on horses. Mrs. Wimbush's engagements with horoscope stimulated Mr. Scogan's interest in clairvoyance in the novel.

Among the guests we also have Anne, a niece of the Wimbushes, who is four years older than Denis and that is why she rejects his overtures of love. Gombauld is another guest who is a successful artist for whom Anne poses and whose advances she also dismisses. Mary Bracegirdle is another guest who has read Freud and been influenced by him looking at sex as an instinctual need that must be satisfied and who is going to be seduced by Ivor, the handsome rogue who sleeps with her in the tower and abandons Crome in the next morning. Ivor also is interested in spiritualism' he "was a good amateur medium and telepathist, and had considerable first-hand knowledge of the next world (CY: 135-6). He is also a poet who 'could write rhymed verses with an extraordinary rapidity' (CY 136). There is also Jenny who is deaf but silently and mockingly recording in her sketchbook what she views of the filthy fancies of the English society at Crome.

Mr. Barbecue Smith, a well-known writer is also invited to Crome by Mrs. Wimbush. When she asks Dennis whether he knows him or not Dennis says, "Barbecue Smith was a name in the Sunday papers. He wrote about the conduct of Life. He might even be the author of *What a Young Girl Ought to Know*" (CY: 43). What she reads to Dennis from one of his books might have been another reason for Eliot's interest in *Crome Yellow*, especially the mystical implications which will be the main concern of Eliot's poems culminated in *Four Quartets*: They are nothing. Vanity, fluff, dandelion seed in the wind, the vapours of fever. The things that matter happen in the heart. Seen things are sweet, but those unseen are a thousand times more significant. It is the Unseen that counts in Life. (CY: 44)

In his numerous speeches in the novel he seems to be interested in spirituality and mysticism which was of special attraction to Eliot, for example, once he said 'optimism is the opening of the soul towards the light; it is an expansion towards and into God, it is a h-piritual [spiritual] self-unification with the infinite' (CY: 90). In this he sums up the goal of mystical experience which will be the major concern of most of Eliot's poems.

III. Mr. Scogan and Madame Sosostris

Mr. Scogan, one of the most influential characters in *Crome Yellow*, is introduced in Chapter Three of the novel as follows:

Next to Mary a small gaunt man was sitting, rigid and erect in his chair. In appearance Mr. Scogan was like one of those extinct bird-lizards of the Tertiary. His nose was beaked; his dark eyes had the shining quickness of a robin's. But there was nothing soft or gracious or feathery about him. The skin of his wrinkled brown face has a dry and scaly look; his hands were the hands of a crocodile. His movements were marked by the lizard's disconcertingly abrupt clockwork speed. His speech was thin, fluty and dry. Henry Wimbush's schoolfellow and exact contemporary, Mr. Scogan looked far older and, at the same time, far more youthfully alive than did that gentle aristocrat with the face like a grey bowler. (CY: 47)

Scogan is presented as the archetype of the well-read, well-educated man of the world who engages in the lengthiest passages of the novel, discussing his view of art and life, of science, politics, love and sex, of the spiritual and the material worlds. Dennis, being a poet "looked at him enviously. He was jealous of his talent" (CY: 47). In one remarkable passage, (Chapter Five, p. 62), for instance, Scogan foreshadows Huxley's dystopian science fiction *Brave New World* which is to be written a decade later.

Huxley's great interest in spirituality and mysticism should not be ignored as a sound reason behind the creation of Scogan and some other characters of *Crome Yellow*. The possibility of spiritual enlightenment', says Sion, 'was to affect key characters in Huxley's fiction' (19-20) and this reflects 'the deeper degree of spirituality that the author also experienced at this period of his life' (20) Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and its sequel *Heaven and Hell* (1956) are good examples of his interest in mysticism. In fact, Eliot shared this interest in spirituality and mysticism in the major part of his poems, especially *Four Quartets*. However, Mr. Barbecue Smith foreshadows what Huxley will empirically prove in *Doors of Perception*:

By cultivating your inspiration. By getting in touch with your subconscious. Have you ever read my little book, *Pipe-Lines to the Infinite?* It is just a little book about the connexion of the subconscious to the infinite. Get into touch with the subconscious and you are in touch with universe. (CY: 69)

He then talks about 'concentration', 'trance', 'purification' and 'uplifting of the soul by suffering' (CY: 70) using many other mystical terms.

No doubt, in creating the character of Mr. Scogan, Huxley had Bertrand Russell in mind. Because in appearance Scogan's description resembles Bertrand Russell and that is why the latter reacted negatively to Huxley's depiction of him as Mr. Scogan (Sion: 30).

However, in Chapter Twenty Five the residents of Crome Yellow are going to be occupied with the yearly Crome fair, a playful event organized every year which, according to Mr. Wimbush, 'has become an institution...it must be twenty-two years since we started it' (CY: 196). Each of the residents has to choose a part in this fair and Mr. Scogan chooses fortune-telling:

- Mr. Scogan reflected. 'May I be allowed to tell fortune?' he asked at last. 'I think I should be good at telling fortune.'
- 'But you can't tell fortune in that costume!' (CY: 197)

Due to his interest in clairvoyance, he takes this role with enjoyment and he comically disguises himself as a woman, dresses 'in a black skirt and a red bodice, with a yellow-and-red bandanna handkerchief tied round his black wig, he looked -- sharp-nosed, brown and wrinkled -- like the Bohemian hag of Firth's Derby Day'³ (CY: 205). A poster is pinned to the curtain of the doorway leading to his tent announcing 'the presence within the tent of "Sosostris, the Sorceress of Ecbatana"⁴ (CY: 206). He started providing shameful and shocking predictions to the innocent and naïve townspeople.

Out of curiosity, Dennis climbed up pretending to tie a Union Jack to the top of one of the tent-poles that he could see and hear what is going on in the tent. A girl comes...Mr. Scogan looked at her hand then whispered

'You are virtuous.'

The young lady giggled and exclaimed, 'Oh, lor!'

'But you will not remain so for long,' added Mr. Scogan sepulchrally. The young lady giggled again. 'Destiny, which interests itself in small things no less than in great, has announced the fact upon your hand.' Mr. Scogan took up the magnifying-glass and began once more to examine the white palm. 'very interesting,' he said, as though to himself – 'very interesting. It's as clear as day.' He was silent.

'What's clear?' Asked the girl.

'I don't think I ought to tell you.' Mr Scogan shook his head; the pendulous brass ear-rings which he had screwed on to his ears tinkled,

'Please, please!' she implored,

.....

Mr. Scogan sighed. 'Very well.' He said, 'if you must know, you must know. But if anything untoward happens you must blame your own curiosity. Listen. Listen.' He lifted up a sharp, claw-nailed forefinger. 'This is what the fates have written. Next Sunday afternoon at six o'clock you will be sitting on the second stile on the footpath that leads from the church to the lower road. At that moment a man will appear walking along the footpath'. ... 'A man,' he repeated – 'a small man with a sharp nose, not exactly good looking''He will ask you, "Can you tell me the way to paradise," and you will answer, "Yes, I'll show you." And walk with him down towards the little hazel copse,' (CY: 207-8)

There is much evidence that Eliot borrowed Madame Sosostris from Aldous Huxley's novel *Crome Yellow* (1921). The first critic who revealed this fact was Grover Smith in his article in *American Literature*, 25, 1954. Smith, says Rainey, 'cited a letter he had received from Eliot, dated 10 March 1952, in which Eliot had said he was "almost certain" that he had borrowed the name from *Crome Yellow* ...' Smith then adds that Eliot has also said that he was unconscious of the borrowing (Rainey, ed. 80). In spite of this, Rainey tries to refute the existence of any connection between Mr. Scogan and Madame Sosostris depending on the word 'unconscious' that recurred in Grover Smith's article. However, his argument is unconvincing because being unconscious of the borrowing does not negate the strong influence of *Crome Yellow* on Eliot which can be strongly detected not only in the character of Sosostris but also in many images especially in his masterpiece *Four Quartets*.

On the other hand, B. C. Southam emphasized the fact that Eliot said 'that he read the novel on its publication in November 1921 and that he is "almost certain" that he borrowed the name from it, although he was "unconscious of the borrowing"' (Southam: 89)

Madame Sosostris was a famous clairvoyant. Clairvoyance, according to *Encarta Encyclopedia* is the

'ability to see or visualize objects and events beyond the range of normal sight. Clairvoyance is a form of *extrasensory perception*, or ESP, which includes any ability to gain information by psychic means, rather than through the physical senses. According to belief, clairvoyance usually occurs when a person with clairvoyant powers is in a state of trance, during which that person can describe the objects or events that appear in his or her mind. (*Encarta*, 2008 DVD)

Some people believe that this ability is gained through psychic visions while others believe that clairvoyance comes through telepathy (*ibid.*)

In the epoch that followed WWI fortune-telling was a wide-spread phenomenon because people were looking for those who were missed in war... the clairvoyant was usually European and therefore she is a *Madame* rather than a (Mrs.) in *Crome Yellow* and Eliot's poem. According to Abdul-Wahid Lu'lu'a, her strange name 'Sosostris' is an ancient Egyptian name and even today there is a street in Cairo bearing the same name. It is shocking that this clairvoyant with the ancient name caught cold (l. 44) and in spite of that she could foresee clearly in her tarot pack of cards. This tarot pack was said to be used in Egypt in the time of the Pharaohs to predict the floods of the Nile, rain fall and the rituals of fertility. It is a wicked pack because it knew everything but it hid what it knew (Lu'lu'a: 105).

Rainey has a different opinion concerning the name 'Sosostris'. 'This name', he says, 'is obviously appropriate for someone who equivocates, or whose answer to every question is a variant of "so so"... to learned readers the name Sosostris may also recall the Greek word for "savior," *soterios*, which survives in the English word soteriological, of or having to do with the doctrine of salvation in Christian theology' (Rainey: 80).

Madame Sosostris is introduced in the First part of 'The Waste Land', line 43:

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante
Had a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. (ll.43-46)
(Eliot:39)

In his notes to the poem Eliot says

I am not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards, from which I have obviously departed to suit my own convenience. The Hanged Man, a member of the traditional pack, fits my purpose in two ways: because he is associated in my mind with the Hanged God of Frazer, and because I associate him with the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus in Part V. The Phoenician Sailor and the Merchant appear later; also the "crowds of people," and Death by Water is executed in Part IV. The Man with Three Staves (an authentic member of the Tarot pack) I associate quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself. (Rainey: 71). The part played by Madame Sosostris in Eliot's *The Waste Land* is crucial to its meaning. Though she is sick because she has a bad cold, she is telling fortune to an unidentified person by turning up a series of cards and through these cards she introduces other important characters: the drowned Phoenician sailor, the man with three staves, the one eyed merchant and the Hanged Man, each of whom, according to Harold Bloom, suggests 'aspects of the themes of darkness, decay, and death' (Bloom: 34)

... Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations.
Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,

Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
 The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
 I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.
 Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
 Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
 One must be careful these days. (ll. 46-59)

The blank card presents Madame Sosostres's disability to see clearly or to tell the fortune accurately 'and this card/ Which is blank, is something he carries on his back, *which I am forbidden to see*' [italics mine] (ll. 52-54). This brings her closer to Huxley's Mr. Scogan who betrays the young girl for his own purpose. Reading her hand, he tells her to go to the footpath that leads to the church to find him waiting for her and he adds: 'walk with him down towards the little hazel copse. *I cannot read what will happen after that*' [italics mine] (CY: 208). Eliot's Madame Sosostres becomes a fake fortune-teller and is 'forbidden to see' exactly like Huxley's Scogan (disguised as Sosostres) who 'cannot read what will happen' to the girl (whom he betrays and intends to seduce) in the hazel copse.

It is more interesting that both Huxley's Mr. Scogan (disguised as Madame Sosostres) and Eliot's Madame Sosostres end their fortune-telling by admitting their inability to foresee more into the future. Mr. Scogan tells the girl "I cannot read what will happen after that" (CY: 208) and Madame Sosostres tells the addressee "which I am forbidden to see. I do not find/ The Hanged Man. Fear death by water" (ll. 54-550). And it becomes certain that Eliot has borrowed not only the character of Madame Sosostres from Huxley, but also the role she plays, namely the disability to see and betrayal, whether this has been done consciously or unconsciously.

Many scenes in Eliot's fragmentary poem deal with the motif of moral degeneration, betrayal and deception prevalent in contemporary Europe after WWI as a result of materialism and lack of religious faith and manifestation of the collapse of the modern culture. This is expounded in scenes of physical love, failed encounters between men and women in Parts II, III and IV. In Part III, for example, we have a scene of seduction

But at my back from time to time I hear
 The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
 Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring. (ll. 96-98)

This is exquisitely juxtaposed with the raping of Philomela by Tereu

Twit twit twit
 Jug jug jug jug jug jug
 So rudely forc'd
 Tereu (ll. 203-6)

In the same part we have the mechanical sexual scene between the carbuncular clerk and the typist. The sexual scene is introduced by Eliot's use of Tiresias, the blind Greek prophet. Eliot Tiresias says that although he is blind he could see this scene

I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
 Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—
 I too waited the expected guest.

He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
A small house agent' clerk, with one bold stare

.....
Flushed and decided, he assaulted at once
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference (228-32 /239-42)

What Tiresias sees is no more than a scene of seduction; a clerk is seducing a 'bored and tired' typist and the encounter is described as 'mechanical' as any other sexual engagement in the *Waste Land*. There are many other scenes of betrayal and seduction in the poem which echo Mr. Scogan's betrayal of the young girl in *Crome Yellow*. In fact, the influence of Huxley's *Crome Yellow* extends beyond the character of Madame Sosostriis and *The Waste Land* to include many images, scenes and symbols in *Four Quartets* such as the lotus pool, the stairs and the yew tree walk which is not the scope of this paper.

IV. Conclusion

So far it becomes certain that Eliot has read Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow* and consequently has borrowed the character of Madame Sosostriis and clairvoyance from him to be pivotal in his outstanding poem *The Waste Land*. He also adopted the motif of betrayal and seduction from him, embodied in Mr. Scogan's betrayal of the young girl, to suit the main theme of his epoch-making poem *The Waste Land*, namely the collapse and decay of the modern culture as a result of the decline of religious faith, sacrifice and morality. The researcher recommends further studies to be written on Huxley's influence on Eliot, especially his interest in mysticism and the occult.

Notes

¹ Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866), English novelist and poet,The publication of *Headlong Hall* (1816) established Peacock's literary reputation.... In most of Peacock's works the characters, many of them caricatures of famous writers of the time, reveal themselves through incidental dialogue at social gatherings (*Encarta*, 2008 DVD).

² Henceforth (CY) followed by page number.

³ William Powell Frith (1819–1909), English painter. His realistic scenes of everyday Victorian life are crowded with figures and incidental detail. Examples include *Ramsgate Sands* and *Derby Day*, which in its day was very popular.

⁴ Ecbatana, city of ancient Media on the site of present-day Hamadān in western Iran. Cyrus the Great captured it in 49 bc.

Bibliography

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Aldous Huxley: Bloom's Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House, 2013.

Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land and other Writings*. New York: The Modern Library, 2002.

Huxley, Aldous. *Crome Yellow*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979.

- Lu'lu'a, Abdul-Wahid. *Al-Arth-ul-Yabab: Al-Sha'ir wal-Qasida (The Waste Land: The Poet and the Poem)*, Beirut: Al-Mu'assasat-ul Arabiya Lil-Dirasat Wal-Nashr, 1980
- North, Michael, ed. *T. S. Eliot The Waste Land: Authoritative Text Contests Criticism*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 2001.
- Rainey, Lawrence, ed. *The Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*. Yale: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Sion, Ronald T. *Aldous Huxley and the Search for Meaning: A Study of the Seven Novels*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010
- Southam, B. C. *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot*. London: Faber & Faber, 1985