Preludes

POEM TEXT

I

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots;
The showers beat
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.

And then the lighting of the lamps.

II

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.
With the other masquerades
That time resumes,
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms.

III

You tossed a blanket from the bed,
You lay upon your back, and waited;
You dozed, and watched the night revealing
The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted;
They flickered against the ceiling.
And when all the world came back
And the light crept up between the shutters
And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands;
Sitting along the bed's edge, where
You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands.

IV

His soul stretched tight across the skies
That fade behind a city block,
Or trampled by insistent feet
At four and five and six o'clock;
And short square fingers stuffing pipes,
And evening newspapers, and eyes
Assured of certain certainties,
The conscience of a blackened street
Impatient to assume the world.

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

SUMMARY

I

The winter evening begins to quiet down, signaled by the smell of steaks cooking, which wafts through side-streets. It's six o'clock. The end of the day is smoky like the burnt-out stubs of used cigarettes. And now the rain and wind blow the dirty scraps of dead leaves around your feet, along with thrown-away newspapers blown through empty, undeveloped plots of land. The rain can be heard beating on broken blinds and chimney pots, and at a street-corner there's a lonely cab-horse steaming in the cold and stamping its hooves. And then gas-powered street lamps are lit.

II

The morning begins to wakes up, with the stale but not too strong smell of beer from the street, which is covered with sawdust that has been trampled by muddy feet rushing to buy an early coffee. Along with all the other illusions that daily routine makes people go through again, one is also prompted to think about all the hands pulling up dirty blinds in thousands of furnished rooms all over the city.

III
You threw the blanket off of your bed, lay on your back and waited for something to happen. You dozed, and watched the night reveal thousands of perverted, squalid images, images that in fact make up your soul. They could be seen flickering on your bedroom ceiling. And when you woke up and the world became familiar again, you could see light peeking through the window shutters, and hear sparrows tweeting in the gutters outside. But at that moment you experienced a vision of the street, which was so strange that even the street could hardly understand it. At the time, you were sitting on the edge of your bed, curling your hair; or perhaps you were holding your yellowing feet in your hands.

IV
His soul was spread out tightly across the skies, which could be seen fading as the sun set behind a city block. This soul was also trampled by hurrying feet at four, five, and six o'clock. At these times one can also see stubby fingers stuffing pipes with tobacco, evening newspapers on sale, and eyes looking around with expressions of self-assurance. Beneath all this the street has a conscience, which wants eagerly to come forth into the world.

I am moved by the ideas that I've associated with these images, ideas that are difficult to get rid of, above all the vague notion of something that is infinitely gentle, but which is always suffering.

Wipe your hands across your mouth and laugh at the thought of what I've just described. The worlds will go on following their cycles like old women, who can be seen collecting fuel in empty, undeveloped plots of land.

THEMES

ALIENATION AND URBAN DECAY

“Preludes” critiques the alienating effects of modern urban life—something the poem argues is characterized by drudgery and loneliness. Urban society, the poem suggests, isolates people from one another, ultimately erasing their individuality and even eroding human morality itself.

The city in the poem is presented as a filthy, desolate place. There are “grimy scraps” of “withered” leaves blowing around, newspapers thrown to the sidewalk, and “broken blinds and chimney-pots.” The streets smell of steak, smoke, and stale beer, and the shades in people's homes are "dingy." The most abundant product of urban life, it seems, is waste and decay.

At first the city also seems abandoned; no people are mentioned save for the vague reference to “your feet,” creating an almost post-apocalyptic atmosphere of desertion. And when people *do* appear, they're just as dirty and dismal as the city they live in: their "muddy feet" trample the ground, their palms are "dirty," and their foot soles are "yellow," implying disease. It's as if the city itself is passing on a contagion to the people who live in it.

Note how the people in "Preludes" also lack any distinguishing features and are instead reduced to their body parts. This underscores the sense of anonymity created by modern life. All these people are living together in this space, but that doesn't make them part of a meaningful *community*. Instead, the urban world seems to *erase* their identities, making them into just a bunch of "feet" and "hands."

This use of synecdoche further implies that people are alienated even from controlling their own bodies, which robotically follow the routines required of modern urban living. People are going through the same motions day after day—opening the blinds, getting coffee, trudging off to work—without really *thinking* about what they're doing. In this way, cities alienate people not just from one another, but also from *themselves*—that is, from their individual wants, needs, and desires.

While the human beings in "Preludes" lack emotion, identity, or agency, the environment itself is personified. Note how the "evening settles down" and the "morning comes to consciousness." This suggests that the emotions that have been drained from the human characters have been transferred instead to their surroundings. It's as if awareness itself is too heavy a burden for modern people to bear, and so needs to be carried by something larger (that is, by the world itself). In poem IV, this then extends beyond simple "*consciousness*" to a moral "*conscience*"—the street seems to possess an awareness of morality that human beings in this world have lost.

This “conscience” is further conceived of in religious terms as a “soul," which is "stretched tight across the sky” and which is also "trampled" by the "insistent feet" of the city's inhabitants. The decaying atmosphere of the city is therefore a moral sin: city-dwellers have "trampled" this universal soul, which encompasses them as part of the sky encompassing the earth. Perhaps this mindless trampling is the reason why, although a new moral conscience is "Impatient to assume the world," the poem ends without any return to morality. Human beings first have to break out of their patterns of behavior, but refuse to do so. Women return to the routine of "gathering fuel," and the poem's reader, addressed in the second person, can only "laugh."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13
- Lines 14-23
- Lines 24-38
- Lines 39-47
- Lines 52-54

THE NATURE OF TIME

Each of the poems within "Preludes" relates the routines taking place in a modern city at a specified time of day: first the evening, then the morning, then the night, and finally the afternoon. The poems see modern life as being artificially controlled by the clock, which leads to people following unnatural routines day after day instead of living freely and in the moment.

Poems I and II are the most focused on daily routine. Poem I is specifically set on a "winter evening" at "Six o'clock" and describes the streets as largely "vacant." This poem begins and ends by describing events that happen every day: people cooking dinner and the lighting of gas-powered street lamps. By sandwiching the first poem between these repetitive activities, Eliot stresses the control that clock-based routines have over the lives of city-dwellers.

This idea is expanded on in poem II, which details morning routines and has numerous echoes of the first poem, such as "smell of steak"/"smells of beer"; the feet of the cab-horse stamping and the "muddy feet" going to buy coffee; the "lighting of the lamps" in the streets; and people "raising dingy shades" to illuminate rooms. Through these echoes, the speaker stresses the fact that even at different times of day behavior is repetitive and cyclical—an idea that, in turn, stresses people's limited freedom in the modern world.

However the second poem also calls this routine a "masquerade." A masquerade was originally a formal ball in which guests wore masks and took part in dances, whose steps were learned by heart. The repetition necessary to do this is similar to the repetitive routines of modern life described in the "Preludes." "Masquerade" can mean a disguise or mask, and as such further implies that the speaker considers clock-time to be merely an illusion. In other words, the modern notion of time is unnatural and false, created arbitrarily to structure people's lives.

This urban routine reaches a peak in poem IV, with "four and five and six o'clock" compressed together in one line, followed by three quick examples of what typically occurs at these times: men stuff their pipes for a late smoke, evening newspapers are published, and the vague statement "eyes / Assured of certain certainties" (which may be a shorthand for the self-assured, self-satisfied looks exchanged by followers of such a clock-based routine).

However alongside this intense depiction of clock-based time is the introduction of Christian imagery: the "soul stretched tight across the skies" is likely an allusion to Jesus's crucifixion, implying that just as the skies enclose the city, urban routine is enclosed within an overarching Christian timeline. The scale of this timeline dwarfs the "masquerade" of urban life: it is "infinit[e]," containing the Fall, Crucifixion, and Last Judgement, and then extending into the afterlife.

However, the poem never explicitly mentions these events. Although the allusion to Jesus implies that the stale routine of earthly life can be redeemed, the poem is ambiguous about such a possibility actually happening. It ends by drawing a comparison between city routine and an infinite timescale: "worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel." This hints at the possibility that, in its repetitions, modern life is actually not a huge break from past behavior. Instead, time is cyclical, and modern people are actually following ancient universal patterns. This comparison is paired with a bitter "laugh," however, and the poem leaves it to the reader to conclude whether this is some profound truth about the nature of time or just a cynical joke about the inevitable suffering of humanity.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13
- Lines 14-23
- Lines 39-54

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.

"Preludes" begins with a juxtaposition. The first line establishes an almost romantic tone by personifying the "winter evening" as settling down and relaxing, which might lead the reader to expect a poem focused on the calming joys of nature. However, line 2 goes immediately in another direction, evoking quite the opposite: the "smell of steaks in passageways" is something resolutely urban. The abrupt third line—"Six o'clock."—then brutally cuts short any illusions of this being a reflective nature poem. Instead, it's located firmly within a modern industrialized city, with routines structured around the clock.

The poem thus almost immediately destabilizes readers' expectations. In a way, the poem positions its readers in a state similar to that of the people the poem will go on to describe—a state in which they lack control over their own lives and feel swept up by the bustling city surrounding them.

The fourth line—"The burnt-out ends of smoky days."—echoes the second line's images of steaks cooking, which produce smoke, with its metaphor comparing "smoky" evenings to the "burnt-out ends" of cigarettes. This is also the first reference to trash in the poem, which views urban life primarily as composed of what is thrown away, rather than what is created. The heavy use of sibilance in these lines ("settles ... smell ... steaks ... passageways ... Six ... smoky days") mimics the sizzling sound of steaks frying as well as the inhalations and exhalations

of smokers, positioning the reader among the city-sounds being described.

The meter of lines 1, 2, and 4 is iambic tetrameter. This means there are four iambs per line, a.k.a. poetic feet that follow an unstressed-stressed beat pattern. For example, here is the breakdown of line 1:

The win- | ter eve- | ning set- | tles down

As with the natural imagery in line 1, perhaps this relatively familiar meter is meant to lull the reader into a false sense of security—to make readers think they're getting into a classical, regularly structured poem. It may also be meant to imitate the repetitive routines seen as essential to city life. However the short line 3 violently disrupts this rhythm and is just the first of many such lines to do so, indicative of the way that the structure of urban life—with its designated working hours—interrupts natural rhythms.

LINES 5-8

And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots;

The poem continues to paint a dirty and dismal city scene. The weather is grim, but not out of the ordinary or awe-inspiring in its might; a "gusty shower" is no epic storm. Instead it is something typical—certainly unpleasant, but ultimately forgettable. Images of trash also abound in these lines: "grimy scraps" of "withered leaves" and thrown-away "newspapers" from "vacant lots" (undeveloped real-estate). These images further evoke ideas of death: "scraps" can also refer to the uneaten bones of animals; a living thing withers when it is long dead; the usefulness of newspapers dies soon after publication, when the news they relate becomes old hat; and vacant lots are pieces of land that have gone to seed. All in all, the speaker clearly does not have much affection for urban life.

The rhyming couplet of "wraps"/"scraps" in lines 5 and 6 is a compression of this whole idea, and suggests that the city has a deadening effect on the people who live there: the city-dweller is wrapped, as if clothed or bandaged, entirely in discarded objects, which conceal their natural humanity and originality. The enjambment here further echoes this idea of being wrapped up, with each line spilling over—or, perhaps, *wrapping* over—onto the next:

... a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers ...

Line 7's reference to "your feet" is also the first mention of a human being in the poem, and also the first of many uses of synecdoche. This technique dehumanizes the people being described, referring only to their body-parts rather than any distinguishing feature of a particular individual. The poem sees city-dwellers as an inseparable mass who simply follow routines without really thinking about them.

The meter of these lines continues the iambic tetrameter begun the lines above, with a few exceptions. Line 6 is written in dimeter, meaning there are just two beats in this line:

The gri- | my scraps

This line is thus much shorter than those that surround it. The same was true of line 3 ("Six o'clock") and will be true of line 9 ("The showers beat"). The insertion of these shortened lines destabilizes the meter, forcing the reader to constantly readjust their reading of the poem.

LINES 9-13

The showers beat
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.
And then the lighting of the lamps.

The final lines of poem I begin with a depiction of rain beating against "broken blinds and chimney-pots." The use of alliteration of "beat ... broken blinds" and the plosive /p/ of "chimney-pots" echo the sounds made by droplets of rain striking hard objects, almost making this into a moment of onomatopoeia.

These lines also have the most extensive use of end-rhyme in poem I: "beat" and "street" rhyme (and also rhyme with "feet" in line 7), as do "stamps" and "lamps." The first set of rhymes, combined with the /b/ alliteration, mimic the sound of rain beating down and of "feet" striking the pavement. Put differently, the insistent "eet" sound itself evokes the repetitive beat of the rain or of those footsteps on the ground. The second set of rhymes—"stamps" and "lamps"—connect the stamping of cab-horses with the lighting of gas-streetlamps, almost as if the former is a signal for the latter.

Polysyndeton ("And at the corner ... And then the lighting") is also used in lines 11-13 in reference to the impatient stamping of the cab-horse and the lighting of the streetlights. This repetition creates the sensation of a mindless routine (this happens, then this happens) followed out of blind habit. The only emotional reaction is that of the horse, which feels "lonely"; the subtle implication is that human beings are already too alienated to feel anything about their situation at all.

Poem I ends with alliteration on the /l/ sound ("lighting of the lamps"). Light traditionally symbolizes knowledge, so this phrase might hint that a sort of awakening is about to occur—that the city-dweller might make some sort of conscious

recognition of this dismal state, might realize how terrible this life is. Of course, this does not come to pass.

LINES 14-18

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.

As in line 1 (in which "The winter evening settles down"), line 14 uses personification in its description of the natural world. Now, "The morning comes to consciousness." In other words, it is the start of a new day. The word "consciousness" takes up the implication in line 13 ("And then the lighting of the lamps") of an imminent breakthrough in self-awareness—but rather than applying this awareness to the city-*dwellers*, it is the city *itself* that comes to this "consciousness." It is as if the city wakes up before its hungover citizens, who are still asleep thanks to last night's beer (the "stale" smell of which lingers). This idea that the environment is more alive and aware than its occupants will be developed later in "Preludes." It hints at the way that urban life tramples down on people's individuality and even on their humanity itself.

The opening lines of poem II echo many of the images from poem I. Here these are the "smells of beer" vs. the earlier "smell of steaks," and the phrase "muddy feet" vs. "about your feet." On that note, synecdoche once more reduces people to anonymous body parts; their "feet" charge off, as if with a will greater than their owners', to "early coffee-stands," li as desperately as wild animals to a muddy watering hole. All of these echoes of the earlier poem further emphasize the repetitiveness of urban routines that are performed unconsciously. The poem makes it sound as if people were machines, and that any sense of freedom and spontaneity has been quashed by urban life.

Ultimately these first five lines of poem II reinforce the idea of modern humankind established in the first poem: as an anonymous mass acting on unconscious instinct. The regular iambic tetrameter emphasizes the repetitive rhythm of trampling feet. Line 18 is composed of three feet instead of four, however, as if mimicking the fact that "muddy feet" come to a halt only once they reach the satiety offered by "coffee-stands."

LINES 19-23

With the other masquerades
That time resumes,
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms.

Before this point, "Preludes" has been focused on one idea of time: clock-time, which organizes modern city life according to a rigid daily schedule. Basically, people base their daily lives—waking up, getting coffee, going to work, and coming home—on the clock. Here however, the poem introduces the possibility that this idea of time is simply an illusion.

It does this by calling the daily repetitions that "time resumes" a "masquerade," a word meaning a disguise or mask. It is also worth noting that "Masquerade" originally referred to a formal ball in which guests wore masks and took part in dances, whose steps were learned by heart. The repetition necessary to do this is similar to the repetitive routines of modern life described in the poem. The use of the word "masquerades" thus stresses the artificiality of clock-time and, as such, of all the repetitive actions associated with it.

Line 19 is thus a turning point in the poem, a fact embodied by its meter: instead of following the usual iambic tetrameter, or simply being cut short of one or more feet (as in lines 3, 6, 9, and 18), it is formed of three trochees (stressed-unstressed), plus an extra stressed syllable dangling at the end of the line:

With the | other | masquer- | ades

Appropriately for a line concerned with re-configuring notions of time and its rhythms, this is the first time in the poem where the iambic rhythm is replaced with a totally different meter.

Poem II ends on another one of clock-time's "masquerades": the "hands / That are raising dingy shades / In a thousand furnished rooms." Yet again, synecdoche emphasizes people's anonymous body parts rather than their distinguishing individual features. This image also recalls the "lighting of the lamps" that ended poem I. The people introducing morning light into their rooms are perhaps also set for the introduction of what light typically represents: new knowledge. However, as poem III goes on to describe, the nature of knowledge becomes much more unstable once the poem transitions from the city's exterior to the isolated interiors of individuals' own rooms.

LINES 24-29

You tossed a blanket from the bed,
You lay upon your back, and waited;
You dozed, and watched the night revealing
The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted;
They flickered against the ceiling.

Poem III is the only part of "Preludes" to focus on an individual person. This person—implied to be a woman from the later references to the "papers" in her hair—is in bed, alternately sleeping and staring at the ceiling. To better understand what is happening here, note that this is an allusion to a scene from the novel *Bubu de Montparnasse* by Charles Louis-Philippe. In this scene, a prostitute named Berthe has just gotten up from her unmade bed and "ses idées étaient couchées en tas dans sa tête" (roughly translated: her thoughts lay heaped confusedly

in her head).

Eliot transforms this ordinary confusion into the hallucinogenic "sordid images" that "flickered against the ceiling." This is the poem's first shift away from documenting external reality to depicting more ambiguous, dreamlike, even visionary, spectacles. The fact that these vague, undefined "images" constitute the woman's "soul," which is usually considered the most personal and unique part of a person, serves to stress the flattening of individual personality that takes place due to modern life: her "soul" lacks any definite features. Moreover, by being described as flickering "against the ceiling" like a film being projected, it is as if her soul exists outside her own body. This is a greater degree of alienation than even in poems I and II; this woman is alienated not just from other people, but from *herself*.

The opening lines jolt the reader out of the impersonal tone of poems I and II by directly addressing them as "You," a shift in focus emphasized by the use of anaphora throughout the next few lines. As the sole example of an individual described in any detail, this figure becomes emblematic of the lives of *all* individuals in the modern metropolis. She is passive, doing nothing in these five lines but lying on her back, waiting, dozing and finally watching. This continues the idea that urban life makes people into passive and limited beings. Further connections to the previous poems abound in the use of the word "sordid," which recalls adjectives like "dingy," "grimy," "stale," and "muddy" from poems I and II.

However, aside from the focus on an individual, this poem has another significant difference from the first two: its meter. Lines 25, 26, and 28 all have one syllable too many, e.g.:

> You lay | upon | your back | and wait- | ed;

These extra syllables create feminine endings, evoking the lazy, stress-free state of waiting, still groggy and halfway between sleep and waking.

LINES 30-34

> *And when all the world came back*
> *And the light crept up between the shutters*
> *And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,*
> *You had such a vision of the street*
> *As the street hardly understands;*

Lines 30-32 all begin with "And." This use of anaphora (which is also another example of polysyndeton) reflects the state of the woman lying on her bed, as she passively absorbs the sounds of "sparrows in the gutters." The fact that "the world" and "light" are the subjects of the verbs "came" and "crept" further emphasizes the person's passivity: it is only on line 32 that she is the actual *subject* of a verb ("heard"), which, like "dozed," "lay," "waited," and "watched," is not a self-propelled activity: people don't choose to hear things, but will hear whatever sounds there are around them at the time.

The rhyme between "shutters"/"gutters" is the only couplet in poem III. Shutters keep light out, while gutters take waste water away. The rhyme here helps draw readers' attention to these words, and to emphasize the poem's idea that, instead of productively absorbing or giving anything to the environment, individuals in the city are fenced off from what's around them.

The most vivid interactions this character has are her own visions, which are likely delusions. The "vision of the street," like the "sordid images" mentioned in line 27, remains undefined. The fact that the "street hardly understands" this vision of it, implies that the vision is utterly distinct from reality. Once more this stresses the theme of alienation, which separates city dwellers from one another, even isolating them to such an extent that they begin to misperceive and misunderstand the visible environment around them. Line 34 also establishes, through another example of personification, the idea that the city itself is more conscious and aware than the people living in it, whom alienation has drained of personality.

LINES 35-38

> *Sitting along the bed's edge, where*
> *You curled the papers from your hair,*
> *Or clasped the yellow soles of feet*
> *In the palms of both soiled hands.*

The unsettling image of this women sitting on the edge of her bed and holding the "yellow soles" of her feet in her "soiled hands" is an allusion to "The Leper" by the Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, which contains the following lines: "She, sitting edgewise on her bed, / Holding her feet ... I sit still and hold / In two cold palms her two cold feet. / Her hair, half grey half ruined gold." This poem ends with a twist that the lady, who is the speaker's object of affection, and whose feet he is embracing, has in fact been dead six months, as a result of leprosy.

Eliot's alluding to the other poem performs two functions here. Firstly it once more stresses the passivity of the isolated individual (what could be more passive than being dead?); secondly, it adds the idea of disease to the imagery of decay and dirt that crops up throughout the poem. This second idea is also stressed by the description of her feet as "yellow," a color associated with bruises and festering wounds, as well as several specific diseases (e.g., yellow fever). It is as if the city itself is passing on a disease to those who live in it.

The fact that she is on the "bed's edge," rather than standing up or lying in it, stresses the fact that she is in between waking and dreaming states, able to perceive reality, such as the twittering sparrows, but also experiencing strange visions. The choice to focus on the woman's "soiled feet" and "hands" recalls "your feet," "muddy feet" and "insistent feet," as well as the "hands ... raising dingy shades" the "fingers stuffing pipes" and the order to "Wipe your hand across your mouth." In this image, the two

most essential appendages for living a mobile, creative life (hands perform a huge range of tasks, feet carry people where they need to go) are reduced to passivity, holding one another, while sitting static on a bed.

The meter here varies once more. Lines 36 and 37 return to iambic tetrameter, but 35 is as follows: trochee, iamb, iamb, spondee (stressed-stressed):

> Sitting | along | the bed's | edge, where

And line 38 has an anapest (unstressed-unstressed-stressed, da da DUM), iamb, and spondee:

> In the palms | of both | soiled hands.

This uneven meter mirrors the idea of this woman being suspended between stable reality (embodied by the regular meter), and wild fantasy (embodied by the exceptions to this meter). Also note the use of enjambment in these lines:

> ... the bed's edge, where
> You curled the papers from your hair,
> Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
> In the palms ...

This further adds to the poem's feeling of instability. The phrases do not match up with the line breaks, creating a sensation of teetering unease as this woman sits on the edge of her bed.

LINES 39-42

> *His soul stretched tight across the skies*
> *That fade behind a city block,*
> *Or trampled by insistent feet*
> *At four and five and six o'clock;*

Poem IV begins with the second mention of a "soul." A "soul" was first mentioned in line 28, in reference to the anonymous woman described in section III. This time the "soul" belongs to an unidentified man, and the language implies that the image of a "soul stretched tight across the skies" is a Christian one. "Stretched tight" recalls the taut skin of Jesus pinned to the cross, and the fact that it stretches "across the skies," which is an impossible position for a human to be in, hints at something larger than human, large enough to encompass the skies themselves.

The enjambment of line 39—"... across the skies / that fade ..."—reflects this idea of stretching as well as the immensity of the skies themselves, as one phrase *stretches* across the line break to the next. On that note, the "skies" are often a symbol for Heaven. Finally, in Christian theology, Jesus is a redeemer of humankind's sins. At this point the poem thus seems to gesture towards the possibility that the filthy, dehumanizing way of life described in parts I, II, and III can be redeemed.

However, the poem then immediately calls this hopeful idea into question; the skies are fading "behind a city block," as if the window of opportunity for redemption is closing, and more importantly the "soul" is "trampled by insistent feet." Enjambment here again echoes the lines' content, as line 41 seems to *trample* over the line break:

> Or trampled by insistent feet
> At four ...

This use of synecdoche is also yet *another* instance of "Preludes" describing people as led unthinkingly by their body parts, which here has the serious consequence of trampling humankind's only chance of redemption! Finally, the accumulation of clock times on line 42 implies that, far from being close to ending, all this mindless routine is only accelerating. The polysyndeton here ("four and five and six") further adds to the sensation of a monotonous routine piling up; there is no escape for city-dwellers from the endless drudgery of urban life, drudgery that goes on and on at every hour.

LINES 43-47

> *And short square fingers stuffing pipes,*
> *And evening newspapers, and eyes*
> *Assured of certain certainties,*
> *The conscience of a blackened street*
> *Impatient to assume the world.*

Lines 43 to 45 use a variety of techniques to emphasize the mindless, monotonous routine referenced in line 42 ("At four and five and six o'clock;"). Line 43 uses sibilance to suggest the abundance of smoky "fingers stuffing pipes"—

> And short square fingers stuffing pipes,

—as does line 45, as if to evoke the whispers of the "certainties" on which everybody agrees:

> Assured of certain certainties,

"Eyes" in line 43 and "certainties" also form a half-rhyme or slant rhyme, possibly hinting at eyes winking at each other to indicate their shared knowledge.

The most abundant technique here, however, is polysyndeton (and sometimes anaphora) of "and," which picks up on the same technique of line 42 ("four and five and six") to create a sense of piling up, of endless monotony:

> And short square fingers stuffing pipes,
> And evening newspapers, and eyes

This repetitive use of a bland connective, used to link things which need have no logical connection (unlike contrasting connectives, such as "however," which only make sense if there is a link between the ideas being contrasted), mimics the dehumanized, repetitive routine of simply doing things (like smoking pipes and reading the evening newspaper) for the sake of it. Again, the implication is that city-dwellers are going through the motions of life, having been zapped of their individuality.

The vagueness of "certain certainties" recalls similarly vague references to the woman's "vision" in poem III and the "sordid images" making up her soul. While being very detailed in its descriptions of physical and material objects, such as rubbish, body parts, and buildings, "Preludes" is very vague whenever it focuses on psychological, mystical, or religious themes. Perhaps this is in order to suggest a moral and spiritual vacuum in the heart of the modern world.

Such vagueness continues with lines 46 and 47, which extend the personification of the environment seen at the start of poem IV:

> The conscience of a blackened street
> Impatient to assume the world.

Both begin to endow the environment with the moral values absent from the human characters, so the "skies" contain a crucified "soul," and here and "street" has a "conscience," a step-up from the morning's "consciousness" (line 14) because of its moral connotations. Crucially however, this conscience is "impatient to assume the world," meaning that it is currently absent, like an actor waiting to come onstage.

Lines 45 - 47 are standard iambic tetrameter, but lines 43 and 44 are unusual. The former has five stressed syllables ("And short | square fing- | ers stuff- | ing pipes") whereas the latter only has three ("And eve- | ning news- | papers, | and eyes"). Perhaps this is meant to subtly undermine the regularity implied by "certainties," which, as with everything related to routine in "Preludes," is considered a "masquerade."

LINES 48-51

> *I am moved by fancies that are curled*
> *Around these images, and cling:*
> *The notion of some infinitely gentle*
> *Infinitely suffering thing.*

These lines contain the first and only use of the first-person in "Preludes." It is highly unusual to delay the introduction of a poem's speaker until the very end of a poem, but this serves to isolate the speaker from the reader. It also positions the last seven lines of "Preludes" as a kind of epilogue to the rest of the poem. The revelation that the preceding poem is the result of the speaker being "moved by fancies" ("fancies" meaning fantasies, or daydreams) prompted by "these images" of the city, undermines its carefully established sense of reality.

These lines imply that the city represents only an *illusion* of reality—an idea first evoked with the reference to city routines being nothing more than "masquerades" in line 19. City life is not real life or natural life, the poem seems to be saying—something also suggested by the appearance of visions in poem III, by the Christian imagery earlier in poem IV, and by the increasing personification of the environment at the expense of human characters.

The reference in lines 50 and 51 to the "notion of some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing" is so vague as to be impossible to reliably interpret. However, it does reinforce the poem's earlier Christian imagery by placing the city scenes—with all their unnaturally segmented clock-time—within an *infinite* timeline (just as Christianity follows an infinite timeline, since God existed before creation and will exist for eternity). Moreover, the fact that this "thing" is both "gentle" and "suffering" recalls the figure of Christ, who was also both "gentle" and "suffering."

Again, though, this is all very ambiguous: the exact nature of infinity and its relevance to daily life are not established by the poem. Whether the awareness that there is a deeper timeline than that of repetitive and dehumanizing clock-time will actually have an effect on re-humanizing or redeeming humankind is impossible to determine. Put differently, the poem does not clarify whether realizing that there is more than this artificial city life will actually do anything to restore the humanity of the dismal, robotic city-dwellers.

The meter of these lines is highly irregular, which is appropriate given its separate status from the rest of the poem. Line 48 is roughly, trochaic pentameter, an inversion (with an extra foot) of the regular meter. It can be read differently, but it is certainly a big difference from the steadiness of the line preceding it:

> I am | moved by | fancies | that are | curled

Here is line 47 for comparison:

> Impa- | tient to | assume | the world.

In basically flipping the meter of these lines, it is as if the speaker is pulling off the curtain—and revealing that what is behind it is totally different from what readers have come to expect.

LINES 52-54

> *Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;*
> *The worlds revolve like ancient women*
> *Gathering fuel in vacant lots.*

The poem ends with a command to another anonymous "you," telling this person: "Wipe your hand across your mouth, and

laugh." A laugh or smile can mean many things (think of the Mona Lisa!), so just what this laugh suggests is very ambiguous. It could be a cynical response to the ideas of eternity presented in the previous lines, or an ironic dismissal of city life by a higher being (i.e., by God).

When paired with the last two lines of the poem, which compare the vast movement of entire "worlds" to those of "ancient women / Gathering fuel," it may be likelier that this line is a dismissal of *both* eternity *and* of daily life. Since the poem concludes by *comparing* these two timelines, which were earlier only *contrasted*, perhaps its conclusion is that deeper ideas of time (represented here by worlds revolving and the reference to ancient history) actually *resemble* the repetitive motions of daily routine—rather than offering (as Christians would have it), a redemption or an escape from that monotony.

This is emphasized by the adjective "ancient," which in addition to meaning very old, also specifically recalls ancient civilizations. On the surface, members of such civilizations had very different lives from those of modern city-dwellers; but whereas Greek or Roman women may have gathered grain, and modern women "fuel," their repetitive lives nonetheless resemble one another's at a deeper level. Both go out every day to carry out, without much thought, the tasks they carried out the day before.

In other words, maybe this is the poem's way of saying that the robotic, meaningless, endless drudgery of city life is not anything new; human beings are simply doomed to such an existence. Quite a dismal way to end a poem!

PERSONIFICATION

Personification plays a vital role in "Preludes," appearing at crucial points in each poem. The first lines of both poems I and II conceive of times of day being conscious: "The winter evening settles down" as if it's somebody relaxing after a hard day at work, and the "morning comes to consciousness," like somebody waking up. The fact that it is the *environment* that is described as conscious stands in contrast to the description of people in the poem, who are depicted as robot-like mindless followers of routine (or, in poem III, as hallucinating, possibly mad, loners). It is as if the intelligence and independence normally associated with humans has been drained from them and taken up by the world around them instead.

This disconnect between the environment and its inhabitants is emphasized on line 34, where the "vision of the street" experienced by the half-awake woman in her bedroom is one that the street itself "hardly understands." This implies that her visions do not align with the reality of the street itself, and rather than being illuminating or revelatory, are in fact delusions brought on by her isolation.

By poem IV, the personification of the city has developed from simply being conscious to having a "conscience"—in other words, a moral code. This is like an animal transitioning into a human: although apes have consciousness, there is little evidence they are developed enough to have a moral system. Not only does the street now have a conscience, it is also "Impatient to assume the world." This evokes the idea of God assuming the world in the form of Christ, and Christ then assuming the cross to redeem humankind. This staggering idea implies that the environment is not merely more conscious and more moral than its utterly dehumanized inhabitants, but that it is also like Christ in being potentially able to redeem human beings.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The winter evening settles down"
- **Line 14:** "The morning comes to consciousness"
- **Line 34:** "As the street hardly understands;"
- **Lines 46-47:** "The conscience of a blackened street / Impatient to assume the world."

SYNECDOCHE

Whereas personification is used to describe the environment in the poem, synecdoche is used to describe its human inhabitants. In poem II "muddy feet ... press / To early coffee-stands" as if separated from the people who own them and acting with a will of their own. The same effect is produced by the "hands / That are raising dingy shades," where once more, there is no mention of the people who own these hands. It is also important to note that hands and feet are the two most essential appendages for carrying out everyday tasks; every able-bodied person has both, meaning they are not distinguishing features. This emphasizes the general, anonymous nature of both these activities, as well as the lack of individual free will involved.

The next instance of synecdoche likewise focuses on feet, which are now "insistent." Despite the different adjective, their behavior is very similar to those earlier feet: they also rush thoughtlessly ahead. However, now the full effect of this thoughtless forward-motion is revealed: it tramples the Christ-like "soul" that stretches across the sky (see our entry on personification for more detail on this).

In line 43, the "short square fingers stuffing pipes" evoke the earlier mention of "hands," since, of course, fingers are part of hands. The "pipes" also echo the "burnt out ends of smoky days" from line 4, associating the personal activity of smoking with the grimy smells and mood of the city as a whole.

The last instance of synecdoche, the "eyes / Assured of certain certainties" in lines 44-45, basically sums up the meaning of the previous four. These urban citizens seem to glance at each other and wink in self-assurance; it is this self-assurance that

allows them to continue behaving so repetitively and passively, to the extent that their body parts seem to have more control over them than do their own minds.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "With all its muddy feet that press / To early coffee-stands."
- **Lines 21-22:** "One thinks of all the hands / That are raising dingy shades"
- **Line 41:** "Or trampled by insistent feet"
- **Line 43:** "And short square fingers stuffing pipes,"
- **Lines 44-45:** "and eyes / Assured of certain certainties,"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is one of the main sound effects in "Preludes." The repetition of the same or similar sounds at the start of nearby words is used primarily to evoke the repetitiveness of city life, which the poem characterizes as based on dull routine. This is certainly the case with the examples on lines 13 ("lighting of the lamps"), 14 ("comes to consciousness"), and 42 ("four and five"), all of which describe actions that occur every day on a mass scale: street lamps are lit each evening, morning is a daily occurrence, and "four and five" pm are necessarily struck every afternoon.

In lines 9 and 10, alliteration echoes the lines' content:

> The showers beat
> On broken blinds ...

The alliteration here feels almost like onomatopoeia because the hard /b/ sound evokes the noise produced by raindrops hitting blinds and "chimney-pots." Line 24 and 25's alliteration is also based on the /b/ sound ("blanket from the bed, / You lay upon your back ...."), and possibly recalls this loud noise of rainfall, as it describes the actions of a woman who is in bed unable to sleep. Loud noises from outside may well be part of what is keeping her awake.

"When all the world came back" is a softer instance of alliteration than the previous example. As it describes a character waking from sleep and experiencing the sights and sounds of the world slowly returning, this is appropriate. She is not quite entirely awake and thus under the influence of hard reality, but is still half-asleep, in a gentle in between state embodied by the melodious /w/ sound.

Much of the alliteration and consonance in the poem revolves around the /s/ sound, which we discuss in our next entry on sibilance.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "s"
- **Line 2:** "s," "s"
- **Line 3:** "S"
- **Line 4:** "s"
- **Line 9:** "b"
- **Line 10:** "b," "b"
- **Line 11:** "c," "st"
- **Line 12:** "c," "st," "st"
- **Line 13:** "th," "th," "l," "th," "l"
- **Line 14:** "c," "c"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s"
- **Line 16:** "s," "s," "t"
- **Line 18:** "st"
- **Line 24:** "b," "b"
- **Line 25:** "b"
- **Line 26:** "w"
- **Line 28:** "wh," "w," "c"
- **Line 30:** "wh," "w," "c," "b"
- **Line 31:** "c," "b"
- **Line 32:** "s"
- **Line 33:** "s," "s"
- **Line 34:** "s"
- **Line 35:** "S"
- **Line 36:** "c"
- **Line 37:** "c," "s"
- **Line 38:** "s"
- **Line 39:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 40:** "c"
- **Line 41:** "f"
- **Line 42:** "f," "f," "s"
- **Line 43:** "s," "f," "s"
- **Line 45:** "c," "c"
- **Line 46:** "s"
- **Line 48:** "c"
- **Line 49:** "c"
- **Line 50:** "s"
- **Line 51:** "s"
- **Line 52:** "W"
- **Line 53:** "w," "w"

SIBILANCE

The soft /s/ sound is by far the most abundant sound in "Preludes." There are also many /z/ and /sh/ sounds, overall making for a very sibilant poem. For the most part this sibilance is used for onomatopoeic effect: "smell of steaks" evokes the sizzling sound of steaks frying; "ends of smoky days" and "short square fingers stuffing pipes," evoke the exhaling of smoke; "gusty shower," the soft patter of rain; etc.

However, sibilance also has other purposes in the poem. This is especially clear in Poem III, which is about an isolated woman seeing "vision[s]" and hallucinatory "sordid images" in her bedroom. Both of these are experienced when she is dipping in and out of sleep. As with smoking, when people sleep they

audibly inhale and exhale, which produces an /s/ sound. Moreover, the softness of this sound associates it with sleep for another reason: because it is restful, and the /s/ sound is likewise relaxing. Thus sibilance in "Preludes" creates an atmosphere of sleepiness throughout the poem. Take a look at some of the specific sibilance in poem III:

> The thousand sordid images
> Of which your soul was constituted;
> ...
> You had such a vision of the street
> As the street hardly understands;
> ...
> Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
> In the palms of both soiled hands.

The /s/ sound then carries right on over to poem IV with:

> His soul stretched tight across the skies

In both instances, sibilance associates these things with the dreamlike "sordid images" mentioned in line 27. This strange, and sleepy atmosphere is meant to leave the reader unsure whether the scenes being described are real or fantastic.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "s," "s"
- **Line 2:** "s," "s," "s," "ss," "s"
- **Line 3:** "S," "x"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 5:** "s," "s"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s," "s," "s," "ss"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 16:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 17:** "s," "ss"
- **Line 18:** "s," "s"
- **Line 27:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 28:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 33:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 34:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 35:** "S"
- **Line 37:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 38:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 39:** "s," "s," "s," "ss," "s," "s"
- **Line 40:** "c"
- **Line 41:** "s," "s"
- **Line 42:** "s," "x"
- **Line 43:** "sh," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 45:** "ss," "c," "c," "s"
- **Line 46:** "s," "c," "s"
- **Line 47:** "ti," "ss"

ALLUSION

"Preludes" is full of allusions to other works, above all to Eliot's own poems. These internal consistencies help to create an overarching "Eliotic" vision of the world. The first example, "burnt-out ends" recalls two other poems from *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), the collection in which "Preludes" was published. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" has "butt-ends of my days," while "Burbank with a Baedecker: Bleistein with a Cigar" has "the smoky candle-end of time." All three metaphors compare time to a candle or cigarette nearing its end, and together illustrate a way of thinking about time that pervades Eliot's work: as an exhausted, inglorious process coming to its grimy end in modernity.

The most extensive allusion however, is poem III. It is a reimagining of a scene from Charles Louis-Philippe's novel *Bubu de Montparnasse*, in which a prostitute called Berthe wakes up after a night with a lover. The original is full of seedy description, describing sweat staining the bed-sheets, "où les corps sont sales et les âmes aussi" ("where bodies are dirty and souls as well"), echoed by the sibilant "sordid," "soul," and "soiled" in Eliot's poem. "Preludes" picks up on two physical details in particular: "ses pieds malpropres, mince et jaune" ("her filthy feet, she was thin and yellow"), contracting them in line 37's "yellow feet." Yellow is a color associated with disease (e.g., jaundice and yellow fever) and the woman's isolation and ennui seem almost to be an infection affecting the city's population as a whole.

There is another allusion, though it is rather academic and not all that necessary to understanding the gist of this poem. "Vacant lots," which appears in lines 8 and 54, is probably a translation of a phrase used a couple times by French poet Jules Laforgue: "terrains vagues." Eliot re-used the phrase in his poem "Second Caprice in North Cambridge." Part of Eliot's aim in his early writing was to transport ideas from French Symbolism into English poetry, especially French Symbolism's focus on modern urban life and its combining this focus with hallucinogenic imagery. "Vacant lots" refers to undeveloped real estate, and its usage here is part of this aim.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "burnt-out ends of smoky days."
- **Line 8:** "vacant lots;"
- **Lines 24-38:** "You tossed a blanket from the bed, / You lay upon your back, and waited; / You dozed, and watched the night revealing / The thousand sordid images / Of which your soul was constituted; / They flickered against the ceiling. / And when all the world

came back / And the light crept up between the shutters / And you heard the sparrows in the gutters, / You had such a vision of the street / As the street hardly understands; / Sitting along the bed's edge, where / You curled the papers from your hair, / Or clasped the yellow soles of feet / In the palms of both soiled hands."

- **Line 54:** "vacant lots"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora occurs at three points in "Preludes." The first instance is at the start of poem III, when the poem's perspective focuses for the first time on an individual character. This shift is especially jarring because in poems I and II, any mention of human beings is highly generalized, focusing only on their "hands" and "feet" rather than on any distinguishing features.

Line 24 totally reverses this. The repeated use of the second person pronoun, "You," transforms the reader from a passive spectator—kept at arm's length from the narrative of the first two poems—into a participant in this third poem. By repeating "You" at the start of three consecutive lines, Eliot emphasizes the intimacy and privacy of the scene being described: had he used third-person, it would be as if the speaker and reader were voyeurs, watching the woman without her knowledge, but the second-person erases this idea, placing the reader directly into the scene.

The next instance of anaphora appears in lines 30-32, which describe the woman waking up to the sights ("light" creeping up "between the shutters") and sounds ("sparrows in the gutters") of the world. The repetition of the word "And" at the start of each line (also technically an example of the device polysyndeton) recalls lines 11 and 13 ("And at the corner ... And then the lighting ..."), which likewise focused on events that happen each and every day; in the earlier example this is the lighting of street lamps, in the later instance, it is morning birds singing and the sun coming up.

This is very similar to the final use of anaphora, which describes people lighting pipes and reading evening newspapers, both actions associated repeated on a mass scale every evening. Thus anaphora, both in lines 30-32 and 43-44 ("And short square fingers ... And evening newspapers ..."), serves to evoke the daily repetitions of life in a modern city.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 24:** "You"
- **Line 25:** "You"
- **Line 26:** "You"
- **Line 30:** "And"
- **Line 31:** "And"
- **Line 32:** "And"
- **Line 43:** "And"
- **Line 44:** "And"

METAPHOR

The first use of metaphor in "Preludes" is in line 4, which compares the "winter evening" to the "burnt-out ends" of cigarettes. As noted in this guide's discussion of the poem's use of allusion, this is a recurring image in Eliot's first published collection of poetry. Smoking cigarettes was considered lowly, a working class habit at the time "Preludes" as written. Eliot thus links a winter evening in the city to the habits and lifestyles of the less well off. He refuses to romanticize the time of day; it is grimy, smelly, and "smoky" (evoking both cigarettes and the steaks cooking in line 2).

The second use of metaphor refers to the movements of time, described as "masquerades" in line 19. A masquerade is a disguise or mask. As such, the metaphor is basically saying that clock-time—the designated hours of the day that dictate urban life—is an illusion. "Masquerades" also originally referred to formal balls in which guests wore masks and took part in dances, whose steps were learned by heart. The repetition necessary to do this is similar to the repetitive routines of modern life described in the "Preludes."

The poem's final metaphor is the most complex. It evokes a vast "soul stretched tight across the skies," and which is also "trampled by insistent feet." We discuss this image more in this guide's entry on personification, but it is worth noting again here how it bears certain similarities to Christ: he was stretched on the cross and his ridiculing by the people of Jerusalem before the crucifixion is evoked by the degrading description of a soul being "trampled." However, the vagueness of this metaphor makes it impossible to definitively identify what it refers to. Whether it is Christian or not, the general notion of the soul being trampled certainly fits with the dehumanizing depiction of urban life that the poem puts forth.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "The burnt-out ends of smoky days."
- **Lines 19-20:** "With the other masquerades / That time resumes,"
- **Line 29:** "They flickered against the ceiling."
- **Lines 39-41:** "His soul stretched tight across the skies / That fade behind a city block, / Or trampled by insistent feet"

SIMILE

There is only one simile in "Preludes," but it comes at an important point: at the very end of the poem. Its comparison of "worlds" revolving to "ancient women / Gathering fuel" is a comparison between the cosmic realm (that is, those revolving worlds) and the earthly realm (the women gathering fuel). This

is surprising because throughout the poem, it seems as if a *contrast* between these two scales of existence is what's important. The sheer banality of repetitive daily routines and their dehumanizing effects on city-dwellers contrasts with the religious ideas of eternity and redemption hinted at throughout the poem (see line by line commentary for a detailed explanation).

However, this final simile undermines any idea of redemption as an end to endless, draining repetition. It implies that, rather than being organized according to a deep, Christian timeline (of the Fall, Redemption, and the Last Judgement, one in which certain changes are destined to occur), the cosmic scale at which "worlds revolve" in fact resembles earthly, clock-based time (that is, the same clock-time that structures and controls city-dwellers' lives). *Both* timescales are monotonous and repetitive, *both* "revolve" like the hands of a clock, which return to the same positions every day. The choice of "women / Gathering fuel" as a comparison to the revolutions of planets is particularly apt, as this is an image of a very lowly routine.

The adjective "ancient" of course means these are old women, but it also places them in a classical tradition, since the word "ancient" describes the civilizations of Greece, Rome, and Egypt. Thus there is also a comparison between the modern routine of gathering fuel and the ancient routines of gathering in the harvest or going to the market. This implies that human behavior actually has not changed very much over the centuries, that the modern city's dull routines in fact resemble those of earlier societies, which in turn resemble the movement of whole "worlds."

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 53-54:** "The worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots."

ASSONANCE

Lacking a consistent rhyme scheme, "Preludes" uses assonance to create a sense of melody and rhythm throughout. This is clear from the first two lines, which—through a combination of assonant /eh/ and /ay/ sounds and consonance of the /w/ and /s/ sounds—feel poetic and lyrical, even as these lines describe something pretty mundane (that is, the odors from cooking meat seeping into alleyways):

> The winter evening settles down
> With smell of steaks in passageways.

This long /ay/ sound echoes throughout the rest of this stanza in fact ("days," "newspapers," "vacant," etc.). It is further supplemented by assonance on the /ah/ ("scraps," "wraps"), /ow/ ("out," "now," "shower," "about"), /ee/ ("leaves," "feet," "beat," "street"), and /aw/ sounds ("lots," "on," "pots"). The result is a very musical sounding first section. Eliot clearly knows how to make his poetry *sound* nice, even when he's describing something he is not too fond of (i.e., modern urban life).

Of course, some moments of assonance do more than make the poem sound interesting. For example, in line 7 the long /ee/ sound "leaves" and "feet" evokes the high, howling sound of that "gusty" wind as it wraps those leaves "about your feet." Later, note the long /oh/ sound that connects the end of poem III to the start of poem IV:

> Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
> In the palms of both soiled hands.
> IV
> His soul stretched tight across the skies

Assonance links the "soul" to the dirty feet and hands of the previous section—subtly suggesting how this "soul" (with its connotations of Christian salvation) has been trampled and soiled by city-dwellers.

"Tight" and "skies" in line 39, meanwhile, both use the long /i/ sound, mimicking the length of a material "stretched" across a space as vast as the "sky." This sound contrasts with the assonance of the short /i/ in lines 49 to 51:

> ... images, and cling:
> The notion of some infinitely gentle
> Infinitely suffering thing.

The short /i/ assonance here links this "infinitely suffering thing" to the vague "images" that the speaker imagines, and to which the speaker's "fancies ... cling."

Finally, the triple assonance in "Assured of certain certainties" in line 45 ironically parrots the way such certainties come about: by being repeated as gossip or cliches, until they are universally accepted as truth. This mocks the received wisdom of the cynical modern person, smoking their pipe and reading their newspaper, who thinks they know all there is to know about how the world works.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "e"
- **Line 2:** "e," "ea," "a"
- **Line 4:** "ou," "a"
- **Line 5:** "o," "o," "a"
- **Line 6:** "a"
- **Line 7:** "ea," "ou," "ee"
- **Line 8:** "a," "a," "o"
- **Line 9:** "o," "ea"
- **Line 10:** "O," "o"
- **Line 11:** "ee"
- **Line 12:** "a," "a"

- **Line 13:** “A,” “a”
- **Line 15:** “ai,” “a,” “ee”
- **Line 16:** “a,” “ee”
- **Line 17:** “ee”
- **Line 18:** “y,” “ee,” “a”
- **Line 19:** “a”
- **Line 22:** “ai,” “a”
- **Line 24:** “o,” “a”
- **Line 25:** “a,” “o,” “ai”
- **Line 26:** “a”
- **Line 27:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 28:** “i”
- **Line 29:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 31:** “u,” “u”
- **Line 32:** “u”
- **Line 33:** “u,” “ee”
- **Line 34:** “ee”
- **Line 35:** “e,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 36:** “ai”
- **Line 37:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 38:** “o”
- **Line 39:** “ou,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 40:** “i,” “o”
- **Line 41:** “y,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 42:** “i,” “i,” “o”
- **Line 43:** “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 44:** “eye”
- **Line 45:** “u,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 47:** “o,” “u,” “o”
- **Line 48:** “o,” “u”
- **Line 49:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 50:** “o,” “o,” “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 51:** “I,” “i,” “i,” “u,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 53:** “a”
- **Line 54:** “a”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment appears throughout "Preludes." The poem does not follow any specific form, and its use of enjambment is free and loose—making the poem feel unpredictable as it follows the speaker's thoughts.

Most of the time enjambment is used when the speaker describes the daily routines of city life. For instance, in poem I, look at the enjambment in lines 5-7 , which deal with the common sight on a winter evening of newspapers and leaves being blown among the feet of passers-by:

> And now a gusty shower **wraps**
> **The** grimy scraps
> Of withered leaves about your **feet**
> **And** newspapers ...

The enjambment echoes the lines' content here. It is as if the speaker's *phrases themselves* are being wrapped across the line breaks, much like the leaves and newspapers are wrapped around the city-dwellers' feet.

A similar thing happens in poem II, which describes people getting up and going about their morning routines. Nearly every line here is enjambed, and the speaker's phrases routinely "trample" across the line breaks—just as these people's feet "trample" across streets in the rush to get their morning coffee:

> From the sawdust-trampled **street**
> **With** all its muddy feet that **press**
> **To** early coffee-stands.

The enjambment between lines 48 and 49 again does something similar, with one line "curling around" the next:

> I am moved by fancies that are **curled**
> **Around** these images, and cling:

Overall, the enjambment throughout the poem evokes the meandering nature of the speaker's thoughts. The poem's lines are (very roughly) the same length, meaning phrases are repeatedly cut off in the middle and must continue onto the next line. This creates the sense that the speaker is thinking off the cuff, and that while city-dwellers are slaves to daily routine and clock-time, the speaker's thoughts themselves cannot be contained by any specific poetic form.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “down / With”
- **Lines 5-6:** “wraps / The”
- **Lines 7-8:** “feet / And”
- **Lines 9-10:** “beat / On”
- **Lines 11-12:** “street / A”
- **Lines 14-15:** “consciousness / Of”
- **Lines 15-16:** “beer / From”
- **Lines 16-17:** “street / With”
- **Lines 17-18:** “press / To”
- **Lines 19-20:** “masquerades / That”
- **Lines 21-22:** “hands / That”
- **Lines 22-23:** “shades / In”
- **Lines 26-27:** “revealing / The”
- **Lines 27-28:** “images / Of”
- **Lines 30-31:** “back / And”
- **Lines 31-32:** “shutters / And”
- **Lines 33-34:** “street / As”
- **Lines 35-36:** “where / You”
- **Lines 37-38:** “feet / In”
- **Lines 39-40:** “skies / That”
- **Lines 41-42:** “feet / At”

- **Lines 44-45:** "eyes / Assured"
- **Lines 46-47:** "street / Impatient"
- **Lines 48-49:** "curled / Around"
- **Lines 50-51:** "gentle / Infinitely"
- **Lines 53-54:** "women / Gathering"

CAESURA

All but one of the caesuras in "Preludes" are followed by "and," which introduces another detail to whatever is being described. In lines 25 and 26, for example, the combination of caesuras with "and" gives the lines a staccato rhythm that mimics the character's unstable sleep, from which she constantly wakes. The four verbs "lay ... waited ... dozed ... watched" also serve to stress how restless is her supposed rest:

> You lay upon your back, and waited;
> You dozed, and watched the night revealing

Line 44's caesura acts as a pause before the introduction of a statement summarizing what people living in cities are like:

> And evening newspapers, and eyes

One can see in their "eyes" that these people feel "Assured of certain certainties"—in other words, that they feel secure and complacent in their way of life. The pause created by the caesura helps set this phrase apart from the rest of the line and adds a sense of weight to it. These people are not likely to be shaken from these "certainties" any time soon.

Line 49's caesura, on the other hand, isolates the phrase "and cling," in order to mimic the act of clinging itself; to cling means to barely hold on, so putting it at the end of the line like that is like someone gripping the edge of a cliff:

> Around these images, and cling:

The one instance of a caesura that isn't followed by "and" is in line 35, where, as with line 49, the pause created by the caesura helps to mimic the idea of being on the edge of something (this time "the bed's," but also on the edge of sleep):

> Sitting along the bed's edge, where

The final caesura is followed by "and laugh," and again helps to emphasize this phrase, to set it apart from the rest of the line:

> Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;

In this moment, the speaker seems to be looking at the dismal state of the human condition and saying that there is nothing to be done about it except to laugh. The caesura adds weight to this phrase, and, as such, to the speaker's sense of resignation.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 25:** "back, and"
- **Line 26:** "dozed, and"
- **Line 35:** "edge, where"
- **Line 44:** "newspapers, and"
- **Line 49:** "images, and"
- **Line 52:** "mouth, and"

VOCABULARY

Burnt-out ends (Line 4) - This refers to the stubs of cigarettes. Smoking cigarettes was looked down on as a working class habit at the time "Preludes" was written, with pipes and cigars the preferred alternative of the middle and upper classes. In comparing the "winter evening" to the dirty, smoky, useless remains of a finished cigarette, this metaphor serves to emphasize the poem's conception of city life as sordid and grubby.

Vacant lots (Line 8, Line 54) - This refers to undeveloped plots of land or real estate. Much of the time, these are empty portions of mud and grass set between buildings, thus emphasizing the poem's vision of a seemingly empty city.

Consciousness (Line 14) - This essentially means "awareness," as in the personified morning becomes aware of these "faint stale smells."

Masquerades (Line 19) - A "masquerade" means a disguise or mask. It originally referred to a formal ball in which guests wore masks and took part in dances, whose steps were learned by heart. The repetition necessary to do this is similar to the repetitive routines of modern life described in the poem.

Shades (Line 22) - Can refer to blinds behind a window or to lampshades, both of which are designed to control the amount of light in a room. A "shade" can also mean a ghost, and this meaning implies that the "shades" being raised are people themselves, who are so dehumanized by city life as to be like ghosts rather than flesh and blood human beings.

Sordid (Line 27) - "Sordid" means both dirty/unclean and immoral/distasteful. It thus relates both to the unclean state of living demonstrated by the untidy bedroom, and the immorality of prostitution (keeping in mind that in *Bubu de Montparnasse*, the text being alluded to in poem III, the woman Berthe is a prostitute).

Vision (Line 33) - A "vision" in this sense refers to a mystical or religious experience—something seen otherwise than by ordinary sight.

Soiled (Line 38) - "Soiled" means dirty, although as with "sordid," it is often used to describe *morally* unclean actions as

well as literally unclean things.

Insistent (Line 41) - "Insistent" is an adjective that describes demanding or unrelenting behavior. The "feet" here, then, will not be swayed from their determination to get to where they need to be going.

Assured (Line 45) - "Assured" means extremely confident. Here it is being used critically and evoking the phrase "self-assured," which can be a compliment but can also describe someone who is arrogant.

Conscience (Line 46) - As opposed to "consciousness" (in line 14) "conscience" is overwhelmingly associated only with human beings. It refers to a moral sense of what is right and wrong, and the ability to make judgments according to these notions.

Assume (Line 47) - "Assume" has two meanings here. The first is to take unto oneself; to receive, accept, or adopt. This usage is particularly common in the religious sense of receiving someone up to heaven (and thus emphasizes the subtle Christian imagery in poem IV). The second meaning is to take something as being one's own (i.e., to take responsibility for). This meaning contradicts the first, implying not religious redemption, but conquest or domination of humankind by the environment.

Fancies (Line 48) - "Fancies" refer to imagined things, especially ideas that are unrealistic or fantastic. It is an old-fashioned word, which encourages the reader to interpret the speaker's ideas ironically, as perhaps they are merely sentimental.

Infinitely (Line 50, Line 51) - "Infinitely" refers to something that goes on forever in time and/or space, and which is thus outside the limits of human life. Gods in different religions are considered infinite, because they transcend human ideas of time and space.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The clearest formal element of "Preludes" is the fact that it is organized into four separate poems (labeled I, II, III, and IV). These different poems within the larger poem create a series of vignettes, or short scenes, of modern urban life. Together, they all paint a picture of a dreary, isolating existence everywhere the speaker looks.

But the shorter poems within "Preludes" are all structured very differently, making the poem feel unpredictable and disjointed even as all these sections essentially build towards the same idea of urban life as being miserable and lonely. Poem I has 13 lines split into two stanzas; poem II has one stanza with 10 lines; Poem III has one stanza of 15 lines; and poem IV has three stanzas of 9, 4, and 3 lines apiece. The differences in structure isolate the poems from each other, echoing the way in which city-dwellers are alienated by urban life.

Poem I can be split into three sections, the first, from line 1 to 4, the next from line 5 to 12, and the last is line 13. The first, consisting of lines 1 to 4, gives the reader an overview of the scene: it takes place on a winter evening, at six o'clock, a scene that can be summed up as the "burnt-out end" of the day. The next chunk, lines 5 to 12, goes into more detail about the goings on in this particular city, at this particular time, focusing especially on what can be seen and heard. Line 13 then signifies a transition from evening to night, hence its separation from the main body of the stanza.

Poem II can be thought of as splitting equally into two sections of five lines each. The first five lines focus on realistic description of city life. However, with the introduction of "masquerades" in line 19, the poem takes a turn, from which it will explore what lies beneath the deceptive "masquerades" that have been its main subject up to this point.

Poem III can be split into two sections. The first, from line 24 to 29, takes place at nighttime, with the female character trying to sleep but being distracted by waking hallucinations. The second, from line 31 to 38 takes place as the sun rises, signifying morning.

Poem IV is the most structured of the bunch, given that it is broken up on the page into three separate stanzas. The first returns to the city, alluding to Christian theology for the first time with the references to a "soul stretched tight across the skies." The second allows the speaker for the first and only time to speak in the first-person, meaning lines 48 to 51 are at a further distance from the narrative than any other section of the poem. The final three lines of the poem return to the grubby sights of urban life.

METER

For the most part, the meter of "Preludes" is iambic tetrameter. An iamb is a poetic foot with a da DUM rhythm, and tetrameter means that there are *four* of these feet per line. Take lines 1 and 2:

> The win- | ter eve- | ning set- | tles down
> With smell | of steaks | in pas- | sageways.

Overall, this steady rhythm echoes the robotic, repetitive behavior of city-dwellers in the poem. However there are numerous lines which break with this pattern, the most important of which are discussed here.

In poem 1, lines 3, 6, and 9 are all clearly shorter than the surrounding lines:

> Six | o'clock
> The gri- | my scraps
> The show- | ers beat

Technically these are written in *dimeter*, meaning they have two feet per line (line 3 is technically something called *headless catalectic*, because it is missing its initial unstressed beat). More important than terminology, though, is the effect of such changes in meter. These create a rhythm of sudden shifts and starts, which throws the reader off balance, preventing them from feeling comfortable.

There are short lines in poem II as well, each of which represents a form of arrival. Line 18 signifies the arrival of "muddy feet" to the "coffee-stands" where they were determinedly headed, and is written in trimeter (three feet per line):

> To ear- | ly cof- | fee-stands.

And line 20, which describes the resumption of artificial clock-time each morning, is again in dimeter:

> That time | resumes,

There are also several *hypercatalectic* lines throughout the poem (all this means is that a line has one syllable *too many*, as opposed to catalectic, which again means they are *missing* a syllable). Interestingly these first occur in poem III, with the shift in focus from the general mass of anonymous city-dwellers to an individual character (the woman on her bed). Lines 25, 26, and 28 are all hypercatalectic:

> You lay | upon | your back | and waited;
> You dozed, | and watched | the night | revealing
> ...
> Of which | your soul | was con- | stituted;

These extra unstressed syllables (i.e, the "ed" in "waited") specifically create something called feminine endings. They evoke the lazy, stress-free state of the woman in this scene—still groggy, halfway between sleep and waking.

Several lines also mix in feet other than the iamb to vary the rhythm, or depart entirely from using the iamb as their metrical basis. The most important of these departures take place in the section including lines 48 to 51. This section has a distinct status from the rest of the poem, as it is the only place where the speaker speaks in the first-person.

Line 48, for instance, is trochaic pentameter. Recall that a trochee has a stressed-unstressed rhythm, essentially making it the *opposite* of the iamb, while pentameter means there are five of these trochees in the line (as opposed to the four in tetrameter). This line is again catalectic, because it is missing its final unstressed syllable that should appear after "curled"; more important, though, is again the fact that these are trochees:

> I am | moved by | fancies | that are | curled

This is basically an *inversion* of the poem's regular meter (DUM da instead of da DUM), as if the speaker is pulling off the curtain to reveal that what is behind it is the *opposite* to what readers thought it was. That is, all these images might just be projections of the speaker's mind, the speakers imagined "fancies."

RHYME SCHEME

"Preludes" doesn't have a strict rhyme scheme, though its frequent use of assonance creates a lyrical, melodious sound throughout. That said, the poem does contain end-rhymes here and there. Poem I, for example, rhymes as follows:

> ABCBDDEFEFEGG

Though there are clearly rhymes happening, there is no obvious pattern to them. The poem is unpredictable, keeping readers in their toes.

The most frequently recurring rhyme is with the word "feet," which appears in each of the four poems. Sometimes this creates end rhyme, as with "feet," "beat," and "street" in poem I. Other times, it creates internal rhymes or assonance, as with lines 16 and 17: "From the sawdust-trampled street / With all its muddy feet that press ..." Being associated with the dirtiness of the pavement, feet act as shorthand for the dirtiness of the city as a whole. The fact that the word's most common rhyme is with "street" highlights this relationship.

It is also worth noting that poem I contains the most instances of end-rhyme. Perhaps this is in order to establish an ordered rhythm that mimics the artificial order imposed by clock-time on human behavior. As "Preludes" progresses, this order is revealed to be a "masquerade"—and, fittingly, the use of rhyme becomes more irregular.

There are occasional half-rhymes as well, such as "eyes"/"certainties" (lines 44-45). This use of half-rhyme here is ironic in lines focused on the idea of certainty, given that, if anything, half-rhyme reveals *uncertainty*. Thus the speaker encourages readers to be critical of the received opinions passed around in cities.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Preludes" is a distant, ambiguous figure—never given a name, age, gender, or profession. For most of the poem, the speaker does not appear at all—making these descriptions of city life seem more like objective reality rather than the observations of a specific person.

That changes in line 48, where the first person pronoun "I" appears: "I am moved by fancies that are curled ..." This makes it clear that the prior lines are coming from a single person's perspective—though, again, readers learn next to nothing about this person. All readers know is that the speaker seems to be a detached observer of city life, cataloguing many small

but telling details. These details, in turn, prompt the speaker to think of "some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing." In other words, thinking about the drudgery and isolation of modern life causes the speaker to feel a vague sense of sadness and unease.

SETTING

The setting for "Preludes" is an anonymous modern city at various times of day. The city setting is grimy, filled with litter and smokey smells, and host to a population going thoughtlessly about its daily routine. The reader gets glimpses of "dingy shades" and "muddy feet," as well as a look into the room of an unnamed woman who is sitting on her unmade bed and staring at the ceiling. Overall, the atmosphere is filled with a sense of isolation and decay. This city is not a lively, bustling place—but rather one filled with dirt, grime, and loneliness.

In early drafts poem I was titled "Prelude in Dorchester (Houses)" and later tweaked to "Prelude in Roxbury (Houses)"; and poems II and III were each "Prelude in Roxbury." Dorchester and Roxbury are neighborhoods in south Boston. Eliot's decision to remove these specific details from the titles helps to create an atmosphere of timeless universality; these poems could take place in any city, anywhere. Although some references (e.g., "the lighting of the lamps" and people smoking pipes) are dated nowadays, Eliot's depiction of city-life still seems remarkably contemporary. Anyone who lives in a large city today will surely recognize these tropes—of people mindlessly trudging to get their coffee, of the stale smells of food and alcohol at the end of the day, and of the loneliness of an urban street late at night.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Eliot wrote "Preludes" during a period of great literary experimentation at the start of the 20th century, a period known as modernism. Modernist writers like James Joyce, Luigi Pirandello, Dorothy Richardson, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Rainer Maria Rilke had all already published work that challenged the established literary norms inherited from the 19th century. These norms were both formal—that is, related to the actual way that poems, plays, and novels were expected to be written—and social: sex, drugs and alcohol, feminism, and working-class life all became new subjects for serious literature during this period.

Eliot wrote the poems that make up "Preludes" between the ages of 22 and 25, inspired partly by this experimental modern atmosphere. Initially published in the avant-garde magazine *Blast* in 1915, "Preludes" went on to be included in Eliot's first collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, in 1917. The dismal take on modern urban life seen in "Preludes" is clearly echoed by Eiot's famous poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

Eliot's models at this time were mainly French Symbolist poets of the late 19th century, such as Jules Laforgue and Stéphane Mallarmé. Symbolism was a movement that rejected Realism in art; instead, it tried to symbolize psychological states through descriptions of the world itself. A way to understand this is to think of the Symbolist painting *The Scream by Edvard Munch*. The landscape and figures are distorted, appearing nothing like they do in real life. This distortion instead represents the screamer's internal agony.

Eliot's descriptions of grubby city life in "Preludes," combined with dreamlike, fantastic visions, were inspired by these French poets. As Eliot himself said, "The kind of poetry that I needed to teach me the use of my own voice did not exist in English at all; it was only to be found in French."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Understanding modernism also relies on understanding the historical period in which it took place. The early 20th century was a time of immense change. New technologies such as the airplane and telephone had altered people's lives immensely in a short space of time. Cities grew denser as more and more people began moving from the countryside to urban centers.

Most importantly, World War I had shattered the old European order. Although it was still going on by the time the final version of "Preludes" was published in 1917, the news of slaughter on the Western Front had deeply shaken ideals inherited from the previous century. Never before had a European war killed so many people, and never so efficiently. The new technologies that had seemingly improved life for so many were used to kill on an industrial scale.

This made modernist artists deeply skeptical of the modern world—hence the critical depiction of the city in "Preludes." At the same time, though, modernist thinking stirred up animosity towards older ways of living; after all, it was the old European empires that had led the continent into war. Overall, then, the modernist ideas that influenced "Preludes" were at once a revolution against Victorian tradition *and* a refutation of those who blindly charge ahead fully confident in their new technologies.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Preludes" Read Aloud — Listen to famous Shakespearean actor John Gielgud read "Preludes" aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzpWSsxosb8)
- Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot — Read several essays by leading experts on Eliot, designed to introduce students

to his work. (https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ybCtAQAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

- Lecture on Eliot's Auditory Imagination — Renowned scholar Christopher Ricks lectures on the importance of sound in Eliot's work. He plays a rare recording of Eliot reading "Preludes" at 27.08. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhkcrQ09YdU)
- Biography of T.S. Eliot — Read a short biography of Eliot on Yale University's Modernism Lab, a website dedicated to the study of the early 20th century art movement. (https://modernism.courseresource.yale.edu/2017/07/12/t-s-eliot/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER T. S. ELIOT POEMS

- Journey of the Magi
- Portrait of a Lady
- Rhapsody on a Windy Night
- The Hollow Men
- The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
- The Waste Land

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