

Critical analysis of Preludes.

The term "preludes" is actually and principally a musical term: denoting an introductory piece of music in Western classical music. But the term is not used in that sense in T. S. Eliot's poem. Eliot's Preludes belongs to his Prufrock era. The poem is divided into four parts; written in different places and at different times. But the unity of the poem is imparted by the imagery and mood of the sequences. In writing this poem, Eliot was influenced by Charles-Louis Philippe's novels, *Bubu de Montparnasse* (1901) and *Marie Donadieu* (1904): depicting the degradation of life in Paris.

As already noted, there is a unity of imagery and tone in the four Preludes; which give them cohesion. The unity is also suggested by the title: preludes are short musical compositions on one theme, often with an improvisatory quality. Eliot's Preludes, however, are the antithesis of Chopin's Preludes; which are a group of piano pieces. Eliot's Preludes are vignettes of modern urban life: with all its horror, monotony and squalor. Preludes I, II, and III were originally entitled "Preludes in Roxbury": although III was written in Paris, and Roxbury was a squalid suburb of Boston. By deleting the reference to a specific place: Eliot gives the poem a wider range of relevance. The poem is a testimony to Eliot's sensitiveness to modern urban experience of life. Urban society, the poem suggests, isolates people from one another: ultimately erasing their individuality, resulting in fragmentation of personality. The city is presented in Preludes as a filthy, demoralizing, dehumanizing place. The poem presents a sequence of images associated with various times of a day: particularly evening and early morning. Despite the images being grimy and ugly: there is a perception of something deeper and nobler. There is a tentative movement towards religious belief: 'The notion of some infinitely gentle Infinitely suffering thing.' These lines perhaps convey the compassionate perception of the suffering inherent in the images with which the poet deals. It is also a clear reminder of Christ's suffering to redeem the sins of humanity. (According to Valerie Eliot, Eliot's second wife, it was with his deaf brother Henry in mind that Eliot wrote these lines.)

At first, the city seems abandoned, desolate; and when people do appear they are as dirty and dismal as the city they inhabit. Their 'muddy feet' trample the street; the soles of their feet are 'yellow', implying disease and decay; the palms of both of their hands are soiled.

The first Prelude depicts a winter evening: from indoor gloom and stale smell it moves outdoors where a gusty shower drives 'withered' leaves and rejected newspapers around 'your' feet, and a 'lonely cab-horse' stands in the 'corner of the street'. The use of 'your' reinforces the idea of a disintegrated human personality. Suddenly, the showers come: beating on 'broken blinds and chimney-pots'. The last, separated line, drives home the idea of the evening's firmly setting in: when Eliot says the gas-powered street lamps are lit. Such adjectives as 'grimy', 'withered', 'lonely' suggest the loneliness and shabbiness of the atmosphere. Preludes critiques the alienating effect of a decaying modern urban milieu: characterised by loneliness.

Preludes I and II were written at Harvard University (Eliot's alma mater) in 1910; III in Paris in July 1911; and IV at Harvard probably in 1911 or early 1912. They were published as a whole in Wyndham Lewis's journal "Blast" in July 1915: one month after the publication of Prufrock in June of

the same year. They are better unified than Eliot's composition seems to suggest; the unity being imparted by the imagery in and the mood of the sequence. Eliot's technique in the poem is not unlike that of Imagist poetry: which held that a clear, hard image is essential for verse. The Imagists (a group of poets immediately before the First World War who practised this kind of poetry) also believed that poetry should use the language of everyday speech and have complete freedom in subject matter. In Preludes, Eliot follows the technique of the Imagists by presenting a series of vivid images.

While the movement in the first Prelude is from indoors to outdoors; reversing the direction, the second Prelude opens in the morning in the street; ending in countless rooms. With the morning the city wakes up after a night of debauchery (we can imagine this from the use of the word 'beer' in the very second line). The stale but 'faint' smell of beer rises from the streets trampled by men with sawdust on their shoes. In the street we can see the "masquerades", masks people assume for going through their daily routine again for a day. Moving indoors, countless hands are raising 'dingy shades', dirty window blinds. The city in the poem, represented by its streets, is presented as a filthy place. The streets smell of 'faint stale' beer: and the window blinds in people's rooms are 'dingy', dirty. The most abundant product of urban life seems to be decay and waste. People are not presented as human beings; rather they are reduced to body parts, like feet and hands. The third Prelude opens in a dingy room where an anonymous human being, most probably a woman: lies down on her back and waits for something unspecified to happen. She dozes, and perverted, "sordid", ugly images, which are part of her life run vividly through her mind as if the images quivered on the ceiling of her room. Then she becomes fully conscious as light crawls through the shutters of the window. She can now hear the sparrows twittering in the "gutters", drains (□□□□□□) outside her room. But at that moment she experienced a vision of the street which even the street could hardly understand. Then this woman, takes off the curl papers from her hair: and holds her dirty, 'yellow', soiled feet in her dirty palms.

In the fourth Prelude, the street is personified. An urban cityscape is presented through fragmented body parts, symbolising disintegrated personalities. The fragmented body parts include hurrying feet, short, square thick fingers stuffing pipes and assured eyes. The street functions as a kind of register upon which the transitory images have impinged. The woman is supine in bed: having dirty dreams, which mirrors the degraded nature of her conscious self. In the fourth Prelude, Eliot's description of human beings in terms of their fragmented body parts, emphasises their utter dehumanisation by a life of endless boring, monotonous, dull work.

The imagery is drawn from Eliot's personal experience of urban life. His extensive reading helped him to transform that experience into poetry. The gloomy cityscape of the first two Preludes can be traced back to the English urban poetry of mid-19th century. It is reminiscent, for example, of Tennyson's stanza from In Memoriam:

'He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day. '

The influence of Baudelaire can also be strongly felt. E. D. H. Greene and Bernard Bergonzi are of the opinion that Preludes I and II are small-scale equivalents of Baudelaire's "Crepuscule du Soir" (Evening Twilight) and Morning Twilight respectively. In these poems Baudelaire evokes a seamy picture of Paris; gas-jets glimmering in the startling wind, prostitution lining up on the streets, a morning wind blowing against the street lamps, houses puffing forth smoke. Baudelaire's compassion for the poor is missing from Eliot's poem, however.

Preludes may appear to be the imagistic observation of urban life: but its detachment and objectivity are illusory, apparent. It is difficult to separate the objects of perception from a perceiving consciousness. The 'lonely cab-horse', standing in the 'corner of the street' the masks people resume with time, that is a new day, for going through their daily routine; are all imbued with the emotions of the observer. It is the observer who perceives the monotonous baseness of the countless hands that raise the 'dingy shades', dirty window blinds; and who perceives human beings as fragmented parts of the body. This fragmentation is a negation of individual identity. But through all this, it is the observer's controlling and shaping consciousness is which provides the thematic unity to the four "Preludes".

Darwin's theory of evolution claimed that life evolved from simple to complex forms through adaptation to environment and natural selection. Henri Bergson, the French philosopher (who profoundly influenced Eliot during his one year stay in Paris as a student of French philosophy and literature from 1910 to 1911) posits a vital principle as the ultimate principle which drives life to ever higher levels of organization. Eliot found Bergson's theory unacceptable. So the images of life in Preludes are devitalised. The cosmos is not shown as evolving progressively forward: creating new forms of life. Rather it revolves ceaselessly, depleted of vitality. The only tentative solace offered is the compassion of the suffering that redeems; 'The notion of some infinitely gentle Infinitely suffering thing. '