UNIT 12: T.S. ELIOT: "PRELUDES"

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 T.S. Eliot: The Poet

12.3.1 His Life

12.3.2 His Works

12.4 The Text of the Poem

12.4.1 Explanation of the Poem

12.5 Poetic Style

12.6 Let us Sum up

12.7 Further Reading

12.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

12.9 Model Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- appreciate T.S. Eliot as a voice of the 'modernist' sensibility.
- read his poetry as a verbal representation of the fragmentation that characterises the 'modern' world.
- familiarise yourself with Eliot's use of the technique known as 'stream of consciousness'.
- appreciate his images and metaphors.
- appreciate the initial incoherence between the different parts that finally achieves integrity in the poem.

12.2 INTRODUCTION

Three seminal texts are believed to have marked the emergence of modernism in English literature: James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, all published in the year 1922. Eliot's poetry seems to capture the very angst of 'modernism' that

was an inevitable given of the First World War as well as the avant garde methods of creation, stylistic innovations and inventions. In this context we are to remember Ezra Pound's famous dictum: "Make it new!" Fragmentary in nature, his poetry reflects the disintegrated perspective. The poem in question, "Preludes" is actually a pack of four 'preludes'- each consisting of uneven lines and in free verse. The poem explores the nuances of a morbid, desolate world presented in four 'cityscapes', pictures of an urban landscape.

The poem was composed between 1910 and 1911, and though written around the same time as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", its tone is in stark contrast to the comic tone that colours 'Prufrock'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term 'prelude' thus: 'an action or event leading up to another; an introductory part or piece of music'. One might remember the musical analogy involved in the last of Elot's serious poems: *Four Quartets*. In both the meanings, one rudimentary constant is coherence. Like in any event, there is a sequence or linearity, so also in music there is cadence. However, Eliot's "Preludes" seems to subvert these ideas of coherence and integrity, and adopt a 'stream-of-consciousness' technique that provokes the reader to drift from one image to another, from one scene to another. This technique allows a writer to follow one's thought automatically, unhindered. Like our thoughts do not move in a linear, sequential manner, the writers of this period (Joyce, Proust, Woolf, and Eliot) try to mirror this fluidity of thought in their works.

The poem moves from one scene to another, assembling a number of images that contribute towards establishing a gruesome picture of the modern world– the squalor behind the glitz and glamour of urban living.

12.3 T.S. ELIOT: THE POET

This unit will introduce you to T.S. Eliot's poem, "Preludes", as a fragmentary poetic piece which took the poet four years to complete. A poem consisting of fifty-four lines, "Preludes" reflects some of the perplexities that a person might experience in a modern metropolis. Eliot composed it during his stay in both France and the United States.

12.3.1 His Life

Born in a very distinguished family in New England, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) was the namesake of his maternal grandfather, Thomas Stearns. However, it was his paternal grandfather, W. G. Eliot who, according to T.S. Eliot himself, ruled the family even from the grave. W. G. Eliot was one of the most important leaders of the Unitarian Church in the U.S.A.

His father was Henry Ware Eliot, a successful businessman while his mother, Charlotte Stearns wrote poetry and was a social worker. Later, their family shifted to Missouri (St. Louis) since, his grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot wanted to establish a Unitarian Church there.

Eliot's love for literature may be linked with his physical weakness and frequent ailments during his childhood. Ailments, which included his congenital double hernia, prevented him from participating in outdoor activities. His isolation opened before him a new vista that led him to the world of literature. He trained himself in Latin, Greek, German and French languages during his years in Smith Academy (1898-1905). Eliot's first published poem was "A Fable for Feasters" that appeared in the Smith Academy record in 1905.

Later, he attended Milton Academy in Massachusetts where he was to meet the publisher of *The Waste Land*, Scofield Thayer. Eliot pursued philosophy at Harvard College and earned a one year premature bachelor's degree in 1909. According to Frank Kermode, 1908 remains the most significant period in Eliot's undergraduate life because it was in that year that he was introduced to Arthur Symon's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). It is through this seminal work that Eliot acquainted himself with Jules Laforgue, Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine. Some of his life-long friends were Conrad Aiken, Herbert Reed, the Woolfs and Paul Verlaine.

From 1910 to 1911 he studied philosophy at the Sorbonne.

He was back at Harvard where he pursued Indian philosophy and Sanskrit. His eclectic Harvard education is often taken to be one of the major sources of the multifarious allusions of poems such as *The Waste Land*.

Eliot was introduced to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, a Cambridge governess, by Conrad Aiken. And Ezra Pound is said to have encouraged Eliot to marry her and they were married in June 1915. Theirs was not a happy marriage. In her letter to Ezra Pound, Vivienne discloses her health related problems. She was suspected to be a neurotic and later sent to an asylum. *The Waste Land*, Eliot confesses, was partially the outcome of this friction in their married life.

Eliot converted from Unitarianism to Anglicanism in 1927 and proclaimed himself to be an Anglo-Catholic: 'classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion'. He made this announcement about himself in the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes*.

It was in June, 1927, that Eliot took British citizenship. He put an end to his unhappy marriage with Vivienne and married Esme Valerie Fletcher in January, 1957 long after Vivienne had died. She had been his secretary at Faber and Faber since 1949. He died on 4th January, 1965, following lung-related health problems. He was cremated at Golders Green Crematorium and as per his wishes his ashes were interred at St. Michael's Church, East Coker.

(N.B. East Coker was the English village from which his ancestors had migrated to America.)

12.3.2 His Works

Eliot initially published his poems individually in journals, pamphlets and periodicals. The total number of poems he wrote remained small. He admitted it to J.H. Woods, one of his professors at Harvard, that, he was conscious of his meagre production of verse, but he wished to make each of his poem significant and eventful.

His notable collections are *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), *Ara Vos Proc* (London) *and Poems*: *1920* (New York). Other collections were *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), a collection of light verse, and *Poems Written in Early Youth* (1967), which included his poems written mostly between 1907 and 1910. His *The Waste Land* (1922) is often considered the most important poem to have come out of British high modernism, while many critics consider his later creation, *Four Quartets* to be his most mature poetic work. He was deeply influenced by French poets like Baudelaire and Valery. Eliot also wrote plays like *Sweeney Agonistes, Murder in the Cathedral, The Rock, The Family Reunion, The Cocktail Party, The Confidential Clerk* and *The Elder Statesman.*



LET US KNOW

Read to find out the characteristic features of modernism and its influence on various fields of art and literature as charted out by M.H. Abrams:

a. T.S. Eliot experimented with new forms to capture the discordant and disorderly universe as a result of the First World War, urbanisation, industrialisation, etc.

b. Gertrude Stein, often categorised with Joyce, Proust, Eliot and Woolf, would exercise automatic writing, a technique that would immediately register the thoughts as they occur to the writer's mind. This technique had affinities with Impressionistic paintings.

c. Writers also practised the stream-of-consciousness method in their work, a technique that allowed free flow of thoughts on paper.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Say 'True' or 'False':

a. T.S. Eliot was named after his maternal grandfather, Thomas Stearns. (True/ False).

b. His paternal grandfather shifted to Massachusetts to establish a Unitarian Church there. (True/ False)

c. *The Waste Land* was published in 1930. (True/ False)

d. *The Waste Land* was his first published poem. (True/ False)

Q2. Fill in the blanks:

a. ……..was his first published poem.

b. Eliot proclaimed himself to be a '……in politics'.

c. Eliot took …….years to complete 'Preludes'.

d. The name of T.S. Eliot's mother was…….

Q3. Name the five plays written by Eliot

Answer:.....

.....

.....

12.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

Preludes

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



Steaks: thick slices of meat (esp. beef) or fish, usually grilled or fried.
Passageways: a lane or an avenue, a street, usually a narrow one.
Gusty: windy.
Grimy: dirty, filthy.
Vacant: empty.

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.



Stale: leftover (food); not fresh.
Sawdust: powdery fragments of wood, made in sawing timber.
Masquerades: false shows or pretences.
Dingy: dirty-looking.
Furnished: equipped with furniture.
Dozed: slept lightly.
Sordid: dirty, squalid.
Flickered: burned or shone unsteadily
Soiled: made dirty.

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.



Insistent: forcing itself on one's attention; pushy, persistent.
Blackened: to make something dirty, black.

12.4.1 Explanation of the Poem

Eliot wrote his first two preludes at Harvard, the third at Paris and the fourth on his return from America. Written in fragments, the poem evokes an individuated, troubled self in the face of an indifferent modernity. The poem adopts a detached, impersonal and objective tone throughout, perhaps, to allow the poet to look at his own era with a critical perspective.

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passage ways.
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.
(Prelude I)

This first prelude conjures up an image of a winter evening- a scene sagged of its vitality. There are steaks cooking in passageways and its perpetual odour indicates it is supper time. The line, 'The burnt out ends of smoky days' immediately takes us back to Eliot's poem "Prufrock" where the speaker laments the swift passage of his youth as 'butt ends' of his life. Gradually a wind gathers, conspiring to shower a spell of rain and wipe away the 'grimy scrap/ Of withered leaves'. The winter rain creates a grey atmosphere as it beats on 'broken blinds and chimney pots'. A horse snorts and stamps its feet at the corner of a street. The newspapers also do not contain any exciting signs but 'vacant lots'. Overall, this prelude sets the stage for an inactive evening, similar to Prufrock's evening, 'like a patient etherized upon a table' Words like 'burnt out', 'grimy', 'withered', 'broken', 'lonely', 'vacuum' convey a lethargy that has taken roots deep into one's mindscape.

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.

(Prelude II)

Generally, for poetic purposes, the morning is a metaphor for fresh beginnings, hopes and promises. But Eliot's morning is no different from his evening pictured in the previous prelude. It continues the lethargy in the morning heavy with 'faint stale smell of beer'. This prelude captures the workers walking down the road, 'the sawdust trampled street/ With all its muddy feet...' We see a movement in this activity but this movement is only a 'masquerade', a perfunctory ritual. They go to their work not as a celebration, but an unavoidable, monotonous ritual. They move forward like automatons, like somebody has turned on the switch and set them on the street. This image is evocative of Eliot's poem, "The Hollow Men". On the other hand, those who wake up in their 'thousand furnished rooms' contemplate how to pass this day which is no different from the previous day. The inhabitants of the city, the occupants of the 'furnished' are not described in any way.

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.

(Prelude III)

Eliot, in this prelude, introduces a surprise element to the reader. The speaker here directly addresses a woman, who can be taken or is

suspected to be a prostitute. The woman sits confusedly and is reminded of all the nights with their 'sordid images'. A flickering light struggles to get in through the shutters of her room. The only hope that is conveyed by the sparrows' chirpings (i.e. Sparrows are usually associated with lechery) is soon relegated to disillusionment when one makes out that it is from the 'gutters'. They are rats that evoke the squalor of the corners of the city, the often neglected, insidious, breeding grounds of crime. The lady sits there remembering the night before, when she stood in the streets, ushering clients to her place. Her vision of the night stands in stark contrast to the day which the street and its passersby will 'hardly understand'. She is seen 'clasping' the 'yellow' soles (i.e. 'Yellow' is usually associated with disease, dirt, etc.) of her feet with dirty hands, in the midst of the 'sordid images' of the previous night and all the nights she has endured.

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.
(Prelude IV)

There is a personification of the city fog in Prelude IV as in 'Prufrock'. The scene now shifts to the street. The morning turns into night and nothing much has changed in this span of time. The street looks fatigued, being trampled by the 'insistent feet' of factory workers who return home by four, five or six in the evening (i.e. the rhythm 'four, five or six' enacts the insistent, repeated activities). The air is heavy with the smoke from their pipes, possibly not from the workers. They move each step with 'certain certainties' which is nothing but one's inability to fathom the uncertainties of these times. The smoke creates a dull, monochrome of the evening, 'a blackened street/ Impatient to assume the world.' The speaker is 'moved' by the indifference of the world– that certain phenomena continue to revolve in their own orbits, irrespective of the damages to normal human life: 'the notion of some infinitely gentle/ Infinitely suffering thing' (i.e. there is a possibility of a reference to Christ's suffering). But immediately after, the speaker adopts a sarcastic tone and smirks at the daily, monotonous routine carried forward by 'ancient women' gathering firewood and fuel. The image of the 'vacant lots' of the old women connects us to the 'vacant lots' (i.e. places where the people dumped waste) in newspapers in the first prelude. It is noteworthy that Eliot has singled out a streetwalker and some old women and to some extent, has given them a face. The rest of mankind seems to be nothing but a host of faceless anonymity. Thus, 'Preludes' is a collage of disparate images, but an insightful reading would enable the reader to have an idea about life in certain city districts in the early years of the 20th century.

"Preludes" …on alienation and disillusionment experienced in the modern, indifferent and hostile world… thefour preludes offer different metaphors and images to convey nature of modern day existence… a poem picturing man in a herd of anonymous faces…robbed individuality. "Preludes" is a grey and gloomy poem… capturing monotonous and stagnant modern day existence.



LET US KNOW

Eliot's 'Preludes' presents a gloomy picture of modern city life. It is a verbal representation of the alienation and loneliness of the world to the individual. It stands in stark contrast to the celebration of a community centric world and sets the reader to believe that one has been sent to the universe to live an uncertain, isolated life. The individuals are but herds, not different from each other, and they continue a monotonous daily routine, where each day is no different from the previous one.



CHECKYOUR PROGRESS

Q3. Choose the correct answer:

a. How many parts are there in 'Preludes'?

i. two

ii. three

iii. four

iv. six

Answer: ……..

b. In the first prelude which season has been described by the poet?

i. winter

ii. summer

iii. spring

iv. autumn

Answer: ……..

Q4. Discuss briefly the poem, "Preludes" by T.S. Eliot. (60 Words)

12.5 POETIC STYLE



Polyphonic: consisting of many melodies (in music); here, to include many voices.

Dilemma: a situation in which a difficult choice has to be made.

Farcical: absurd and useless.

Monotonous: dull because lacking in variety or variation.

Stoic: calm and uncomplaining.

Eliot adopts a detached and objective tone throughout the poem. Unlike 'Prufrock' which is but a lament in comic light of an individual, 'Preludes' is an enmeshed voice of many people at the same time. The voice conveyed is **polyphonic** but the **dilemma** remains the same- the indifference and monotony of the modern world– a mechanised herd that has been robbed of its individual qualities who march forward each morning to be greeted by an equally cold world.

'Prelude I' opens to a winter scene where everything is bleak and painted in grey. The evening downpour makes no difference to the static picture. The structure of the poem indicates stagnancy and to expect anything new in such situations is **farcical.**

'Prelude II' opens to a morning scene that conveys the same lethargy experienced in the previous evening scene. It is tinted with "faint stale smells of beer" and contributes nothing hopeful to the gloomy picture. It is a morning like the previous ones, when workers move out in the streets to pursue their jobs. It is a **monotonous** ritual that is exercised every day without fail.

'Prelude III' adds a new subject to the poem. The reader sees a human face, that of a (presumably) streetwalker, who contemplates the dirty and painful images of the previous night and all the nights she has suffered. This prelude is a picture of the neglected lanes that constitute the silent world that parallels the hustle and bustle of urban existence.

'Prelude IV' is an invocation of what the poem started with- an indifferent evening. The world remains indifferent and follows its regular pattern of daybreak and the gradual descent of night. The reader sees faces of 'ancient' women collecting firewood, oblivious to the damage already done to the world and its inhabitants. It brings again the image of 'vacant lots' suggesting powerfully that nothing much is expected from this world.

"Preludes" is a very important and effective poem because it marks the development of Eliot's poetry from *Prufrock* to *The Waste Land*. The

comic tone in ‘Prufrock’ vanishes and we see a mature handling of images and metaphors in “Preludes”. Eliot’s poetry has been acknowledged as a large verbal canvas that draws in imagery and metaphors to depict the disillusionment of the modern world.



12.6 LET US SUM UP

Eliot’s poem, ‘Preludes’ introduced us to a whole new world of unconventional poetry writing forms and styles. It also familiarised us with his fragmentary style stitching up disparate images into one holistic picture. Eliot, through this style, tries to mirror the disintegration of the universe. “Preludes” offers us a bleak picture of a world where the evenings and mornings are just passages of time where nothing much is changed. It is a world full of automatons or robots that perform their duties in a mechanised way, devoid of any emotions. This poem vividly invokes the gloomy picture and somehow the hollowness in the modern world.



12.7 FURTHER READING

1) Moody, David A. (1996) *Tracing T.S. Eliot’s Spirit: Essays on His Poetry and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2) Tiwari, Nidhi. (2001) *Imagery and Symbolism in T.S. Eliot’s Poetry*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributers.

3) Worthen, John. (2009) *T.S. Eliot: A Short Biography*. London: Haus Publishing.

12.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1 a. True b. True c. False d. False

Ans to Q No 2 a. "The Fable for Feasters"

b. royalist

c. four

d. Charlotte Stearns.

Ans to Q No 3. a. four b. winter

Ans to Q No 4. This first prelude conjures up an image of a winter evening- a scene sagged of its vitality. There are steaks cooking in passageways and its perpetual odour indicates it is supper time. The line, 'The burnt out ends of smoky days' immediately takes us back to Eliot's poem "Prufrock" where the speaker laments the swift passage of his youth as 'butt ends' of his life. Gradually a wind gathers, conspiring to shower a spell of rain and wipe away the 'grimy scrap/ Of withered leaves'. The winter rain creates a grey atmosphere as it beats on 'broken blinds and chimney pots'. A horse snorts and stamps its feet at the corner of a street. The newspapers also do not contain any exciting signs but 'vacant lots'. Overall, this prelude sets the stage for an inactive evening, similar to Prufrock's evening, 'like a patient etherized upon a table' Words like 'burnt out', 'grimy', 'withered', 'broken', 'lonely', 'vacuum' convey a lethargy that has taken roots deep into one's mindscape.

12.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Comment on "Preludes" as a representation of the angst of modern existence.

Q2. How do the women characters in the "Preludes" convey a note of absurdity and hopelessness of human existence?

Q3. Comment on the 'streets' images adopted by T.S. Eliot in his "Preludes".

Q4. How does the landscape in the first prelude set the mood of the subsequent gloom prevalent in the poem "Preludes"?

Q5. Compare this poem with Eliot's "The Hollow Men" and mark the striking similarities between these two poems.

**** ****