

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

**“FRAGMENTS” AGAINST “RUINS”:  
A STUDY OF ELIOT’S IMAGERY IN “PRELUDES”**

**GAGANA BIHARI SUAR**

Lecturer (English Pedagogy),

Department of B.Ed, Bhadrak Autonomous College,

Bhadrak, Odisha.



**Article info**

Article Received: 19/01/2023

Article Accepted: 16/02/2023

Published online: 21/02/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.1.122](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.1.122)

**Abstract**

In most of Eliot's poems, the images play a vital role in the process of poetic communication. The poem “Preludes” (1909-11) records Eliot’s meaningful use of images in order to direct the reader’s attention to the very theme i.e., the spiritual hollowness of people and despair caused by the decline and dissolution of modern civilization. Within the four sections of the poem, Eliot has catalogued the images which we can classify as seasonal imagery, urban imagery, body images, and the image of the soul. What is relevant here is Eliot’s concept of “Objective Correlative”. The images function as objective correlative with which Eliot looks into the modern condition, reaching, as if, “near the bone”. Eliot’s use of imagery not only endows the poem with intellectual intensity and emotional exactness but also offers with flashes of recognition a look into the very “cerebral cortex and digestive tracts” of modern life, merging the subjective and the objective, the head and the heart, the feeling and the thought.

**Keywords:** Imagery, Objective Correlative, Spiritual hollowness, Poetic Communication, Emotional Exactness, Modern Condition.

**Introduction**

One of the most marked technical features of Thomas Stearns Eliot’s poems is his use of imagery. T S Eliot’s penchant for images can be traced back to two major influences on him. The first is the influence of the Imagist poets and the second is his acquaintance with the French poets, Charles Baudelaire, Tristan Corbiere, and Jules Laforgue. Imagism spearheaded by Eliot’s mentor Ezra Pound, T.E. Hulme et al. in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was “designed to replace the “soft”, discursive narrative voice of Victorian verse with a harder, more condensed, Imagistic language – “nearer the bone” (Carter, 294). Imagist poems tend

to be short, sharp glimpses, which contrast with the lushness of Romantic and Victorian verse. The second influence as has already been mentioned was that of the French poets. When Eliot was a young man of 22, he went to Paris from Harvard during the academic year of 1910-11. He went to Paris, to some extent, as a response to his reading of Arthur Symon's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) and at this time France meant poetry for Eliot. This year was one of the most important in Eliot's development as a poet and critic. He came close with the lectures of the philosopher Henry Bergson and entered into the inheritance bequeathed by the French Symbolists and Jules

Laforgue more genuinely than any other English-speaking writer. From Baudelaire, Eliot learned how to depict the sordid aspects of life in the modern metropolis. From Corbiere and Laforgue Eliot adopted the tone of mocking irony and despair filtered through imagery. Avoiding the emotional looseness, nostalgia, escapism, and penchant for the pastoral, Eliot through his use of images "strives to restore to English poetry the sinewy masculinity, the emotional exactness and intellectual intensity of some seventeenth-century English poets and dramatists he most admired" (Swarbrick 68).

### Discussion

The "Preludes" are the poems of a deeply disillusioned persona who has seen the emptiness and boredom of life. The poems are snapshots of modern life in the city. There are four sections and they are set at different times – evening, morning, night, and day. This sequence emphasizes the feeling of dullness & monotony, as if, one day simply repeats the other day. The title, "Preludes" which simply means a short introductory piece to music also points towards this repetitiveness. The mornings and the evenings are a prelude to repetition, "to more and more mornings and evenings in the long and dreary cycle of existence" (Swarbrick 29).

The four sections are conjugated in the poem, "Preludes". But a close study reveals that the last prelude being a double one gives the poem five stanzas, a quintuple structure. According to A. A. Mendilow, it is "what might be called the principle of structural discontinuity" (320). The poem opens with a seasonal image. The image of "winter evening" is but suggestive of what is sterile, slothful, and lazy. The loss of courage and enthusiasm among the city dwellers makes society paralyzed. It refers to the lack of vitality. Again, in the fourth prelude, it is evening, four, five, and finally six o'clock, at which the first prelude began. The dull, monotonous life of man is presented here. The modern man "arrives at his vision", as Mendilow observes, "not however as an observer but as a participant, through complete identification with the world of fact" (320). It is but the focus on the spiritual hollowness among the modern man. The

disordered sense of time that evening, morning, and afternoon all embedded together with six o'clock.

Urban imagery also plays a vital role in this poem. In 1959, Eliot pointed to the autobiographical origin of his "urban imagery" in an address entitled "The influence of landscape upon the poet". Referring to his hometown of St Louis, Missouri, Eliot said which B. C. Southam quotes:

We lived on in a neighborhood which had become shabby to a degree approaching slumness ... for nine months of the year my scenery was almost exclusively urban, and a good deal of it seedily, drably urban at that. My urban imagery was that of St Louise, upon which that of Paris and London have been superimposed (Southam 49).

A number of urban images make the atmosphere of the street of Boston a sordid, filthy, and dirty one which suggests the shabbiness of modern civilization. The decline and dissolution of society are marked by these images. "The broken blinds and chimney pots", "sawdust -trampled street", "dingy shades", and "stale smells of beer" are but objective renderings of subjective feelings. It is the feeling which makes to feel moral degradation. The internal corruption of civilization is thus presented symbolically by Eliot. Paul Fussel is of the opinion, "The world of moral states must thus be presented indirectly and at a second remove: symbolism can suggest moral conditions which themselves elude description and evaluation"(196).

Body images are here to signify the inward filthiness of a city-centric society. The images of "the hand", "feet", "hair", "eyes", "mouth", "and finger" serve the idea of fragmentation which is a negation of individual identity. Eliot has skillfully placed the image of the parts of a body side by side with the image of the soul, "The Thousand sordid images/ Of which your soul was constituted" (27-28) which is but raising the question of spiritual awareness among the modern people. In the fourth stanza, the comparison of the soul to a dirty street symbolizes the filthiness of the inner self and thus causes eternal pain and suffering on part of the mind of man. The concept of "infinitely suffering thing"

(51) is but the perception of the poet of the suffering of every individual. In the words of Grover Smith:

Thus in the four "Preludes"(1909-11), the poet shows us a series of dreary urban scenes and tentatively offers a formula to gloss over the impersonal horror of these by envisioning "some infinitely gentle/ Infinitely suffering thing", a Christ-like personality, that he imagines to be revealed through the mean and sordid appearance of the world (6).

Eliot introduces "Objective Correlative" in his poems to communicate his emotions directly to the readers by finding some objects suggestive of it. The objects used in the poem "Preludes" are but the objective rendering of subjective feelings. But Eliot's formulation has been criticized by many critics. Ronald Tamplin says:

It does, however; draw attention to Eliot's extreme interest in associative techniques. It is very much an aberrant term in Eliot's critical usage which is habitually clear, only losing clarity when he gets over-involved in defining the terms in which he is conducting his argument (112).

But it cannot be denied that Eliot's concept of the "Objective Correlative" is essentially dramatic in nature. Some critics are also with the same opinion. F.O. Matthiessen says, "In the terms of this description the dramatic element in poetry lies in its power to communicate a sense of real life, a sense of the immediate present – that is, of the full quality of a moment as it is actually felt to consist" (67). In fact, "Preludes" reveals Eliot's characteristic method of using images, which are mainly precise renderings of an urban scene, as "Objective Correlative" for a wide range of thoughts and feelings.

At the very end, the poem for the first time drops into the first person. The poet himself trembles on the edge of his vision. He has felt the feelings of the modern man who opens the window hesitantly to let in a new day and take up the challenge of reality. As Grover Smith defines, "people are but equivalent to the ugliness within their scope of vision, and their dreams are limited to "assuming" in one scene or another, that reality"(6).

## Conclusion

In the whole poem, we see that Eliot uses a large number of images in the process of poetic communication. It reveals Eliot's characteristic method of using images as "Objective Correlative" in order to dramatize the plight of the poem's speaker. We see that Eliot has written the poem a few months after he had been attending Bergson's theory of creative evolution where life evolved from simple to complex forms. But, here, Eliot opposes this theory in the poem where the images of life are devitalized.

Some of the images used by Eliot refer to other poems by Eliot e.g., the feeling of weary disgust evoked by the image of "The burnt-out ends of smoky days" reminds us of Prufrock's "butt-ends of my days and ways. Eliot's images are like Saussurean signifiers. They offer us short glimpses into the emptiness and the weary trudge of modern life. The images are conceived in the manner of the 17th century Metaphysical poets whom Eliot admired very much. In the image "The burnt-out ends of smoky days", there is "Discordia concors", the combination of the dissimilar ("the burnt end of the cigarette and the day"). The compact impact of the images gives masculinity to the poem and achieves a unification of thought and feeling so that our intellect and emotion are simultaneously engaged.

## Works Cited

- Carter, Ronald, and John McRae. *The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland*. London: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Fussel, Paul. "The Gestic Symbolism of T.S. Eliot". *Elh, a Journal of English Literary History* 22.3 (1955):194-211. Web. 18 April 2018.
- Green, David. *The Winged Word: an Anthology of Poems for Degree Course* (Selections). Madras: Macmillan, 1974. Print.
- Matthiessen, F. O. *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*. New York: OUP, 1958. Print.

- 
- Mendilow. A.A. "T.S Eliot's Unlovely Street". *The Modern Language Review* 63.2 (1968) :20-33. Web. 18 April 2018.
- Ronald, Tamplin. *A Preface to T.S. Eliot*. Singapore: Pearson Education, 2003. Print.
- Smith, Grover. "Getting Used to T. S. Eliot". *The English Journal* 49.1(1960) : 1-9. Web 17 April 2018.
- Southam, Brian Charles. *A Students Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot*. London: Faber and Faber, 1977.
- Swarbrick, Andrew. *Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot*. London: MacMillan, 1993. Print.