
“The Sordid Images”: Drab Reality of Modern Life in T. S. Eliot’s “Preludes” and Louis MacNeice’s “Bagpipe Music”

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Abstract:

Man has gradually corrupted himself. Consequently, the claim that humankind is the crest of creation has become conspicuously weak in the modern period. In fact, the very notion of humane quality has been thwarted, for modern man has lost faith in himself as well as in religion. Moreover, there is obviously no *stock* value system to meet the cultural crisis and guide man towards a positive orientation. Life without values has become indisciplined, aimless and devoid of meaning. Thereupon, the modern trend of life has worn a different image, which is both new and sordid. This all finds an unfailing expression in T.S. Eliot’s poem “Preludes”. The image of modern life has increasingly become more gray and drab later on. Selfishness, cruelty, pleasure-seeking mood and utterly immoral activities have come to characterize modern man. This drab reality is well documented by Louis MacNeice’s poem “Bagpipe Music”. Although “Preludes” affords a shift in tone and displays a slight spiritual consciousness, and “Bagpipe Music” incorporates some occasional touches of aesthetic beauty, this paper, however, will argue for the fact that these two poems virtually depict the bleak aspects of modern life in their totality. The essence of these two poems is not to represent the happy-go-lucky motif, but to capture the pathos that lies beneath the surface lavishness of modern life. To conclude, the patterns of life in modern digital era that these two poems foreground breathe the climate of drab reality.

Key words: modern man (throughout the Abstract “man” has been used to mean “human being”), corrupted, lost, values, aimless, image, sordid, lavishness, foreground, digital, drab reality etc.

Introduction:

Some anarchists may harbour the sentiment that modern civilization has reached the summit of its advancement. Some scientists can claim that modern society has achieved its

maturity in terms of economic prosperity and technological development. Modern life, however, is not so cheerful and beautiful to sing of if people undertake a value-based approach to it. The reality surrounding modern life is rather shocking, gray, uninspiring and drab. Although one cannot deny the scientific progress and economic growth in modern times, but the graph of human progress in terms of religious or moral values displays a different picture; it is in Eliot's own words "progressively backwards" ("The Choruses from 'The Rock'", Sec. VII, L. 33). Indeed, modern civilization has gained momentum only to die down morally. It, therefore, goes without saying that modern society suffers a cultural crisis and there is no *stock* value system to address the crisis. Even in the beginning of the modern period (1910–, or 1914–) this collapse of cultural base was quite conspicuous, a facet of which is present in the poem "Preludes". "Preludes" was probably written in 1912 (Southam, 38). The year 1912 dates the preparatory years for the First World War (1914–1918). During this two-year span society went through changes to a great extent. Earlier ethical values, which could be found in practice, though not very strongly, before the beginning of modern age, rendered unfit for the new or "modern" social discourse. Wordsworth's pantheistic philosophy encapsulated by the sincere description of a beautiful natural landscape in his poetry or Browning's robust optimism expressed by the air of hopeful ambience of his poetry has paled into a nightmarish backdrop in modern times. Unlike the earlier social set-up prior to the twentieth century, modern social environment is more a mess than a disciplined society. Disorder, disintegration, immoral luxury, and lack of vigour in life have become the characteristic of modern age. This cold acceptance of life and the drab reality surrounding it immediately inform the very opening of "Preludes" —

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 scrap
 Of withered leaves about your feet
 And news paper from vacant lots;

The lines quoted above do not definitely evoke any romantic scene, which the reader may have expected from the title of the poem, "Preludes" just by looking at it. But it is not a Wordsworthian prelude to something sublime and the beautiful; rather it precludes something ugly and the bleak. Most of the words used here involve negative connotations. Words like "winter", "smell", "steaks", "burnt-out", "smoky", "gusty", "grimy" etc. are reflective of the modern drab reality. The use of the word "evening" signals the want of light. The atmosphere and the time is further reinforced by the line "Six o'clock". The collage of "winter" and

“evening” emphasize the coldness and colourlessness of modern life at the level of metaphor. Again, the dominant meter of the poetic lines afore-quoted is Iambic tetra meter. This continuous strong Iambic beat of the lines, which are mostly composed of monosyllabic and disyllabic words, accentuates the bleak backdrop of modernity. Moreover, the fifth line initiates the enjambment which continues until the eighth line of the poem. This texture of run-on line in Eliot does not go unstressed. This form is, in fact, designed to provide a quick contrast of “gusty shower” with “withered”. All these three words are disyllabic. This likeness of these words in a way blurs the difference among them in that each of them does not bring any hope, for shower can be positive for something withered, but here the gusty shower only creates filth out of scraps, dried leaves and waste newspapers. Eliot has prepared such an unromantic background to epitomize the drab reality of modern life in an implied way. The words “broken”, “blinds”, “lonely”, “steams and stamps” also evoke a sense of bleakness. The words “broken” and “lonely” hint at the disintegration and alienation that characterize modern life. The reference to light as evident in the phrase “lighting of the lamps” does not mark any shift in the tone of the poem. The lamps here do not signify hope or brightness of life; it simply signifies night which has now advanced from the evening with which the poem opens. With the end of the day and night reader may expect something better than this drab atmosphere in the morning. Whatever the connotations are, the mention of light at this juncture may have inspired this expectation in the reader. But Eliot’s dealing with reality often shocks the reader and for this reason critics like D. E. S. Maxwell, Eloise Hay have criticized Eliot’s negative attitude to life. Accordingly, the description of the morning that appears in the following section of the poem under discussion breaks the reader’s anticipation. This section rather reflects a more sordid image of life typical of modern times:

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.

The illusion of a vain luxury has surrounded modern life. And this illusion still has a strong hold over modern man. Though there is a reference to “consciousness” in the first of the lines quoted above, modern man is yet to be disillusioned. His is a state of stance, which is well expressed by the form of the line. The line is in Iambic tetrameter but the second and third syllables of the word “consciousness” being unaccented or weak ones form a pyrrhic, which is not balanced by any strong regular foot in the same line, rather Eliot has introduced an enjambment made it a run-one line so as to sustain the weakness in the word. This weakness in being conscious is also highlighted by the state of stance created by “beer”.

Again, in the phrase “stale smells of beer”, all the four words are monosyllabic and in the line these two –“stale” and “smells”– form a spondee. So, the metrical pattern of the line too signifies the strong impact of beer that lies heavy over the consciousness. The following stanza of the poem captures another sordid image of modern reality.

With the other masquerades

That time resumes,
One thinks of all the hands
That are rising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms.

This pursuit of immoral pleasure is random in modern age. This practice brings only about dirt in the fabric of society. Dingy shades in furnished rooms, “where bodies are dirty and the souls as well” (Smith, 20-21) again reflect the sordid image of human habitation in modern society, where man seeks pleasure and enjoys himself but still he has to experience some difficulty and pain that disturb him at night. This is expressed by the lines that follow:

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;

This passing of sleepless night and the experience of pain is purgatorial in nature, for this consciousness, which was absent in the previous section, can disillusion modern man. The trajectory of soul expressed in the line, “His soul stretched tight across the skies” hints at the positive move from the part of modern man whose “eyes/Assured of certain certainties,/The conscience of a blackened street”. The “blackened street” is perhaps the consciousness of sin, which is emphasized by “conscience”. To quote Manju Jain, “‘Blackness’ implies a sense of sin, and ‘conscience’ of moral discrimination and responsibility” (66). So, modern man is now “moved by fancies that are curled/Around these images, and cling:/ ... Infinitely suffering thing”. Again, this reference to suffering hints at the purgatorial stage of modern man. But this expectation is also subverted at the end and the circle of modern life with all its sordid images or drab reality returns back to position where it started from: “Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;/The worlds revolve like ancient women/Gathering fuel in vacant lots”. Thus this poem, “Preludes”, which belongs to Eliot’s earlier poetry, affords a study of the monotonous and drab reality of modern life. Helen Gardner in her critical work entitled *The Art of T. S. Eliot* has also shared her view in this context, “ALTHOUGH all Mr. Eliot’s poetry is the expression of a certain kind of apprehension.... In the earlier poetry the apprehension is a kind of glass through

which he views the world; it is a dark glass through which life is seen with a strange clarity, but drained of colour and variety” (“The Time of Tension”, 99).

Unlike T. S. Eliot, Louis MacNeice was a Marxist. He opposed the exploitation of the labour class by the bourgeois and wanted a change in the economic production and distribution. Apart from his consciousness of the distinction in the economy and social class, Louis’s view of the degradation of moral values and the consequent alteration in the modern society of his time is also present in his poem “Bagpipe Music”. The poem was written in 1937, two years before the Second World War (1939-1945) began. A few years ago man witnessed the brutality of the WW I and rejected any doctrine that glorified man. Man lost faith in himself as well as in religion. So modern man now finds himself busy only in the pursuit of luxurious pleasure. This is well expressed in following lines of the poem:

It’s no go the merry-go-round, it’s no go the rickshaw,
All we want a limousine and a ticket for the peepshow
Their knickers are made of crepe-de-chine, their shoes are made of python,
Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with head of bison.

In the following stanza the words and phrases like “blood for whiskey”, “a bit of skirt in a taxi” clearly reflect the sordid image of modern society. The phrase “a bit of skirt” refers to a woman wearing minimum of clothes. This speaks of the animal physicality of the modern times. Again, in the line “I am through with overproduction” reflects the excessive physicality that modern man is zeroed in on. This unchecked and random life style of modern man results in the chaos and disintegration in societal life, this lack of harmony in modern life is well expressed by the title of the poem, “Bagpipe Music”. The line with which the poem closes, “But if you break the bloody glass you won’t hold up the weather” breathes the climate of a more possible chaos in the culture, the culture that is earlier denied at earlier section of the poem, “it’s no go your culture”.

Thus, in the conclusion it can be stated that modern social scenario has been altered a lot and both T. S. Eliot and Louis MacNeice are socially conscious poets. To respond to the moral degradation or the cultural crisis both of them have shown their remarkable sincerity. Their depiction of the ethically or morally chaotic social atmosphere is true to the life. And accordingly these two respective poems that have been dealt with above so far critically captures the lack of culture and the simultaneous immoral activities which go to reflect not any romantic reflection of modern life but the sordid image of the drab reality surrounding it.

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