

T.S. Eliot  
Preludes  
Some general questions

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Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St Louis, Missouri, in 1888. He attended Harvard University and graduated with a Masters degree in Philosophy. While there, he published several poems in the Harvard Advocate. The poet left the United States in 1910, moving first to France, then Germany and finally London. He married Vivienne Haigh-Wood in 1915, which caused him to settle permanently in England. His marriage was never successful, however, and they separated in 1933. In 1956 he would remarry, this time to Valerie Fletcher.

Early during his stay in London, Eliot fell under the influence of Ezra Pound -- the great American poet -- who also assisted in the publication of his early poetry. The publication of his first book of poetry -- *Prufrock and Other Observations*, 1917 -- revealed Eliot as a forerunner of Modernism, the philosophy of Modern Art. His next book -- *The Waste Land*, 1922 -- is claimed by many to contain some of the most important poetry of the 20th century.

Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948. He died in London in 1965.

"Preludes" has been described as a vivid portrayal of the decadence and decline of modern society, and more particularly of modern urban society. This was not a new theme. Indeed, Oswald Spengler -- the great German Philosopher of History -- was already writing about the collapse of Western Society. The Great War of 1914-18, Spengler wrote, was simply a manifestation of this collapse.

Eliot and Spengler were contemporaries and it is probable that the poet would have read the German's writings while studying philosophy at Harvard University, although Spengler's best known work -- *The Decline of the West* -- would be published only in 1918, one year after Eliot's own publication of "Preludes".

1. Study the poet's use of the personal pronoun in this series of poems: "you/yours", "one", "his", "I" and "they". What conclusions do you arrive at? (10)
  
2. Eliot has called this series of poems "Preludes".
  - What is a "Prelude"? (4)
  - Why do you think the poet has used this title? (4)
  
3. "Preludes" consists of four separate poems. What is the theme of each? (10)
  
4. It is said that a knowledge of the poet's background is sometimes important to an understanding of a particular poem. Is this true for understanding Eliot's "Preludes"? (6)
  
5. It has been argued that "Preludes" deals with "spiritually exhausted people who exist in the impersonal, tawdry modern city". Comment on the truth or otherwise of this statement? (10)

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