Eliot's Preludes\(^1\) exposes the seamy side of modern civilization and also dwells upon the sordid aspect of city life. The poem serves as a sort of a prelude to the poet's conception of modern life that is characterised by a sense of decay and frustration.

The very opening of the poem depicts the dull and cheerless life in the metropolis. It is the winter evening. The smell of steaks fills the passage ways. The air in the day time is filled with the smoke from the chimneys of factories. Stormy rain falls on the newspapers and then on the chimney pots which suggest the langour and shabbiness of city life. During night people cannot have a sound sleep. There is a lonely cab-horse that steams and stamps at the corner of the street. The image of the winter connotes gloom and passivity. It is a season when people do not stir out of their abodes and are primarily cloistered. The smell of steaks throws light on the destruction of nature by the people who lead an artificial life. The theme

of sordid life is further accentuated when the poet says:

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; (3-8)

'Six O' clock' is almost the closing of the busy official activity. This is in consonance with 'burntout ends of smoky days.' Naturally, one is reminded of the recurring of this theme in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*:

"To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?" (60)

The butt-ends of the cigarettes are useless and so they are to be thrown away. When they are thrown away they become hateful and repulsive. The poet seems to compare the modern urban life with the butt-ends that are useless and odious. Similarly the identity of city life is lost. The modern men are like cigarette butts that slowly burn themselves out. Modern men are the suffering generations.

The gusty shower wraps 'the grimy scraps,' 'withered leaves' and 'newspapers from vacant lots.' They are vacant in the sense they are not yet built upon. Here the imagery suggests the picture of dirt, dryness, aimlessness and shabbiness. The following lines enhance the ugliness of this life:
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. (9-13)

Here, the window 'blinds' of the city houses are broken. The metal pipes fitted to the tops of chimneys are beaten by the gusty shower. Modern city is exhausted and worn out like the broken blinds and chimney pots. At the corner of the street a lonely cab-horse stands steaming and stamping. Perhaps it too, is impatient and lonely. The state of the cab-horse is in consonance with the state of the urban masses who are alienated.

The theme of sordidness and dirt pervades in part II of preludes. The people in the city perform trifle activity. They do not undertake any cultured activity. According to Eliot,

Culture is the one thing that we cannot deliberately aim at. It is the product of a variety of more or less harmonious activities.²

The beautiful morning becomes a disfigured thing for the modern man. There must be a clean and refreshing atmosphere in the morning. Unfortunately in place of freshness,

there is 'faint stale smell of beer.' The street is dirty and full of saw dust. The muddy feet of the city dwellers trample the street when they go to coffee-stands.

The passage of time is reflected in the activities of daily life. So, masquerades become the sordid images of daily activity through which time manifests itself. Morning brings faint stale smell of beer, 'saw dust trampled street,' 'muddy feet' and workers or coffee-stand owners raising dingy shades to protect the people from rain while the drawing rooms are very clean and decorated superficially as the thousand furnished rooms. The people are hankering after coffee-stands living petty-lives. They are the people who have no identity and they do not know the very purpose of their lives. The ugliness and dirt one finds in the street, are due to the materialistic concerns of the modern man. According to Eliot, man is leading a life that is away from both nature and religion. In Eliot's own words:

We may say that religion ... implies a life in conformity with nature. It may be observed that the natural life and the supernatural life have a conformity to each other which neither has with the mechanistic life .... a good deal of our material progress is a progress for which succeeding generations may have to pay dearly.  

The modern man's activity is not in conformity with nature and God. So he is thoroughly alienated. People walk mechanically in the streets and meet aimlessly at coffee-stands. They do not lead a life of integrity. Even though they gather at coffee-stands, they feel alienated and disintegrated.

Even in stanza III, the theme of alienation and the loss of identity continues. This time we find women in the streets who represent loss of civilization. The lady in the poem is unclean and she struggles sluggishly, and prepares herself to get out of bed. Here we may agree with Grover Smith and say that Charles Louis Philip's novel, Babu de Montparnasse supplied the subject for the third part of Preludes - the morning awakening of a woman in the slums. The principal passage from which Eliot took imagery for his poem reads thus:

At noon in the hotel room ... a grey and dirty panes of the window ... bed of hotel rooms, where the bodies are dirty and soils as well. Berthe, in her chemise, had just got up. With her narrow shoulders, her grey shirt, her unclean feet; she too seemed to have no light.⁴

Like Berthe, the protagonist in Preludes is restless and she cannot sleep during nights even in a thousand furnished rooms because the hidden reality, a sense of alienation, bursts forth at such moments of tranquillity:

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You dozed and watched, the night revealing
The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted \( (26-28) \)

The woman is in a state of helplessness because she has witnessed many sordid scenes during the day. She indulges in dirty worldly matters. She is a witness to a thousand sordid images.

Even the street imagery connotes the lack of meaning and definite goal in life. In fact, the plight of the woman is in consonance with the sordidness in the streets. The image points out the meaninglessness and the mechanical life of the modern man.

Towards the end of the poem, the poet feels that the ugly scenes which he has been describing remind him of something which is infinitely gentle and which has been suffering infinitely. The poet has some concern for the pathetic situation of the protagonist. He says:

Wipe your hand across your mouth and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots \( (52-54) \)

Here the imagery of ancient women gathering fuel in vacant lots suggests the misery and the poverty of the lower middle class people living in the modern society. They do not have any desire to get rid of their suffering because they, like the streets, do not have any soul. They are poverty-stricken and gloomy regarding spiritual matters.
This sense of impoverishment seems to haunt the modern world. It appears as though man existed without doing anything substantial. So, this sense of alienation and arid monotony can as well be got rid of if the modern man is aware of his degradation. He should do something concrete and meaningful. This suggestion is very well brought out in the next poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.*