

T. S. Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (1911; 1917)

Twelve o'clock.

Along the reaches of the street
Held in a lunar synthesis,
Whispering lunar incantations
Dissolve the floors of memory 5
And all its clear relations
Its divisions and precisions,
Every street lamp that I pass
Beats like a fatalistic drum,
And through the spaces of the dark 10
Midnight shakes the memory
As a madman shakes a dead geranium.

Half-past one,
The street lamp sputtered,
The street lamp muttered, 15
The street lamp said, "Regard that woman
Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand, 20
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin."

The memory throws up high and dry
A crowd of twisted things;
A twisted branch upon the beach 25
Eaten smooth, and polished
As if the world gave up
The secret of its skeleton,
Stiff and white.
A broken spring in a factory yard, 30
Rust that clings to the form that the strength has left
Hard and curled and ready to snap.

Half-past two,
The street-lamp said,
"Remark the cat which flattens itself in the gutter, 35
Slips out its tongue
And devours a morsel of rancid butter."
So the hand of the child, automatic,
Slipped out and pocketed a toy that was running along the quay.

I could see nothing behind that child's eye. 40
I have seen eyes in the street
Trying to peer through lighted shutters,
And a crab one afternoon in a pool,
An old crab with barnacles on his back,
Gripped the end of a stick which I held him. 45

Half-past three,
The lamp sputtered,
The lamp muttered in the dark.

The lamp hummed:
"Regard the moon, 50
La lune ne garde aucune rancune,
She winks a feeble eye,
She smiles into corners.
She smooths the hair of the grass.

The moon has lost her memory. 55
A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,
Her hand twists a paper rose,
That smells of dust and old Cologne,
She is alone

With all the old nocturnal smells 60
That cross and cross across her brain.

The reminiscence comes
Of sunless dry geraniums
And dust in crevices,
Smells of chestnuts in the streets, 65
And female smells in shuttered rooms,
And cigarettes in corridors
And cocktail smells in bars."

The lamp said,
"Four o'clock, 70
Here is the number on the door.

Memory!
You have the key,
The little lamp spreads a ring on the stair,
Mount. 75

The bed is open; the tooth-brush hangs on the wall,
Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life."

The last twist of the knife.

Points of Reflection

1. does the spell cast by the moon aid the narrator in ordering his memories (ll.2-12)?
2. Eliot often references objects without describing their specific type. Why might he identify the madman's flower as a *geranium* (l.12)?
3. would the utterances of the street lamp carry the significance if uttered instead by a bird, horse, dog, or other animal? Why an inanimate, immobile, and artificial street lamp?
4. why does the light of the door opening to welcome the unidentified woman evoke the notion of a *grin* (ll.16-18)?
5. what do a polished, twisted branch (ll.25-29) and rusty, weakened spring (ll.30-32) have in common with the memory that spawns them?
6. whatever does the specter of a cat eating rancid butter have to do with a child's pocketing of a toy (ll.34-40)? Are these two images meant to be thematically relevant to one another?
7. does "she" (l.52, etc.) refer to the moon, or a woman? Has the moon lost her own memory, or someone else's (l.55)?
8. does memory serve a positive, salutary function in this poem?
9. does the narrator's return to home (ll.71-77) constitute a reentry into the mode of memory which involves "clear relations," "divisions and precisions" (ll.6-7), or a continuation of the alternate form of memory illustrated within the body of the poem?
10. is sleep here regarded as something which brings rest and rejuvenation (l.77)?