

Twentieth-Century Fiction
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Lecture - 18
Preludes - Part 1

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T.S. Eliot (1888–1965)

Preludes

I

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
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;
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.

II

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.
With the other masquerades
That times resumes,
One thinks of all the hands
That reach into dinner-chairs

III

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;
They flickered against the ceiling.
And when all the world came back
And the light crept up between the shutters
And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands;
Sitting along the bed's edge, where
You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands.

IV

His soul stretched tight across the skies
That fade behind a city block,
Or trampled by insistent feet
At four and five and six o'clock;
And short square fingers stuffing pipes,
And evening newspapers, and eyes
Assured of certain certainties,
The conscience of a blackened street
Impatient to assume the world.
I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:



So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Twentieth Century Fiction. We will begin with a new text today in continuation with the poetry that we just been covered recently. And the poem we will start off for today is T S Eliot's, Preludes, which is part of the Prufrock and Other Observations collections. So, we just finished with Prufrock, the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock and we find how this particular poem entitled Preludes is the continuation, thematically as well as statistically, some of the things that we discussed already in Prufrock.

So, the first thing that one notices about this poem and this should be on your screen is that these are like 4 different pieces put together. So, Preludes as you know are music pieces. They are like the pieces of music which prelude the main composition. So, the initiation pieces, the you know introductory pieces before the main composition begins that is the classic definition of Preludes in terms of a music vocabulary, a music metaphor.

Now, what this poem does is that it gives you different vignettes of city images. It has a very montage like quality. And we have seen already how the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock too contains lot of cinematic qualities, montage qualities you know certain visual styles which are very cinematic in quality and you know we have the same kind of images in preludes as well, right.

So, if you take a look at this poem this is about metropolitan drudgery, this is about the ennui in the metropolis, boredom, the inertia in the metropolis and also about decadence. So, in a there are lot of decadent images, images of decadence images of consumption, images of being consumed. So, we have this sort of human beings consumed through a metropolitan lifestyle, through a metropolitan decadence that is something which keeps coming up in Eliot's poetry.

And after this we move on to Wasteland which is one of the biggest and one of the most famous poems Eliot ever wrote, and one of the most famous works in twentieth century literature. And, you find how that these elements of metropolitan ennui, drudgery you know they all reach the culmination in the Wasteland which is essentially about a wasted metropolis, spent metropolis, tired metropolis.

But over here too in this particular poem Preludes we have a series of images which are reflective of the wasted quality of the urban setting, the metropolis, right; so, The Metropolis and Mental Life, which is the name of the book which I perhaps recommended already by Georg Simmel. So, you know that setting the metropolis and mental life they converge together to create a series of images which are one of ennui inertia and boredom and decadence of course, and that is something which we find you know recurring in Eliot's poetry or modernist poetry in general.

Now, there is a voice in this particular poem. This is the first person voice and oftentimes the speaker addresses the reader as you, right and different human elements the different human figures in this particular poem. But what is interesting to see is how the human qualities, the human figures, the human presences are represented in very very metonymic terms, fragmented terms.

And again, that connects to some of the issues which we dealt with already in the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock, the fragmentation and alienation of modern life, and how the metropolitan life generates this alienation or produces this alienation, how this alienation

becomes an effect, a contagious affect which infects everyone which infects inhabitants of the metropolis, right. So, alienation, boredom, ennui, decadence, so these become the recursive markers in Eliot's early poetry, especially with the way the human figures are represented very metonymically.

So, we if we remember in the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock, we saw how you know that poem we have human figures represented through very very metonymic images, the short cuts, like a finger, a smoking pipe, you know leaning outside the window; so, lonely man in shirtsleeves leaning out of the windows. So, again those are images which do not give you a holistic and whole picture of the human self. And so, it gives you a very fragmented image of the human self, and this fragmentation on the part of representation, it is part of the theme.

So, again look at the way in which the style the manner of representation and a matter what is represented and how it is represented, they converge together in very interesting and complex ways. So, that that convergence is very very complex. And we have something very similar happening in this poem as well, where the human beings are represented using metonymic images, in a very metonymic manner you know a finger perhaps, a hand perhaps, a sartorial object perhaps, the decadent object perhaps, but never fully, right.

So, never in a holistic full form and that kind of a representation which is essentially one of fragmentation and interruption is part of the representation of politics in the Eliot's early poetry and which is obviously reflective of the human condition of alienation and boredom and ennui and decadence, ok. So, that is the general background in out of which this poem emerges and out of which Eliot's early poetry emerges in general. So, let us take a look at the poem and see how that gets corroborated and reflected in this poem.

So, this is preludes in 4 different fragments and 4 different passages which should be on your screen now. So, this is the first prelude. The winter evening settles down with smell of steaks in passageways 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, the showers beat on broken blinds and chimneypots. And at the corner of the street a lonely cab horse steams and stamps and then the lightning of the lamps.

So, the very first let us take a look at the first couple lines opening. The winter evening settles down with smell of stakes in passageways. So, you know these passageways are obviously, very narrow passageways. These are not broad expansive passageways. So, you can smell the steaks being fried.

So, again look at the way in which the sensory quality in the poem is manifested or manifests itself very directly and immediately in the very beginning of the poem. It is very very sensory; you can smell the steaks being fried in the passageways and even in the settling down with the smell. So, again the evening has almost there is almost a tactile quality about how the evening is experienced. So, again you can see the olfactory quality and the tactile quality, they converge together to create very very complex cognitive conditions.

So, the winter evenings settling down with the steaks being fried together. So, the temporality of the evening and the tactility and the olfactory quality of this steaks being fried, they are combined together to create a very complex cognitive condition, right which has been represented over here. And, now we have the image, this recursive cutting in of clock time and we have already spoken of the different dimensions of time in Eliot's early poetry. So, we have seen how clock time and real time or clock time and psychological time they are sometimes in sync and sometimes out of sync in Eliot's early poetry.

And we find this politics of time; you know recursive in modernist literature as when we move on to something like *Wasteland* and *Mrs Dalloway* and most famously in Joyce's *Ulysses* which is also a text which we will cover. We find this convergence and out of sync, convergence in incompatibility of clock time and real time or clock time and psychological time, it is something which the modernist narratives you know engage with very very complex way.

So, six o'clock is a clock time over here. Six o'clock is the time and the winter evening is settling down with the very tactile dense smell of steaks in the passageways and immediately after we have a metaphysical conceit. So, if you remember a metaphysical conceit is that technique in which two very seemingly, apparently disparate entities are combined together, compared together to create a cognitive effect, that effect could be

one of shock, that effect could be one of recognition, that effect could also be one of reawakening.

So, you know if you remember you know the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock which is a poem which we just finished prior to this the image of measuring out your days in coffee spoon. So, the coffee spoon is something very mundane, something very domestic and the whole idea of measuring out a day is something very existential and abstract and perhaps profound as well.

So, the profundity of measuring out the day with the banality of the coffee spoon combined together, it creates a very complex cognitive condition which can sometimes be shocking in quality and which can convey a sense of waking up. It can contain an epiphany for instance, it can contain an enlightenment, it could contain a sense of shudder as well.

Now, this particular image, the burnt out ends of smoky days, when a day coming to an end is compared to a cigarette butt, right; so, again this it is like just the way a cigarette is consumed, the day is getting consumed over here. And of course, the day is an experience over here. So, the experientiality of the day is important for us to understand and unpack, right.

So, again the cigarette butt which is coming to an end because of the way it is being smoked away, and the day coming to an end because you know it is coming to it is been exhausted are compared together in a very interesting way which is also quite shocking and also quite complex in quality, ok.

So, the burnt out ends; so, the burnt out ends of a smoky day, so, this the entire day is like a cigarette which is coming to an end. So, this evening is the last leg of the day, right and that is coming to an end and in due course of the time. So, again look at the way in how temporality and tactility are combined together.

So, the temporality of the day coming to an end, tactility of the cigarette the sense of holding a cigarette or experiencing a cigarette coming to an end, are combined together in a very interesting combination, in a very interesting you know conjunction and juxtaposition which is a class example of metaphysical conceit.

And this is something, this is a technique that Eliot borrows heavily or draws on heavily and obviously, he is using legacy of the metaphysical poets by John Donne and Andrew Marvell, ok. And he was a big admirer of Donne and Marvell's poetry. Those of you interested in Eliot would know that he had written several essays advocating that kind of poetry in favour of the metaphysical poets and also individual essays on individual poets like Donne and Marvell, ok.

So, the whole idea the day coming to an end like cigarette is conveyed to us and then we have a series of very decadent depressing images of mundane metropolitan languor, mundane metropolitan boredom. And now, a gusty shower wraps, suddenly it is a shower over here, a gusty shower, there is something very sprightly about it, something very very immediate about it, something very very quick about it, a gusty shower wraps the grimy scraps of withered leaves about your feet and newspapers from vacant lot.

So, again if you look at take a look at the different materials the different signifiers of boredom over here and decadent and you know purposelessness, you know you get a feel that you get a feel that this is connected to a more a broader sense of boredom. So, withered leaves are dead leaves.

So, these are leaves which have come to an end, these are leaves which have died presumably with the arrival of winter and the leaves have not been broomed away. So, the leaves are still at your feet. So, again this is the first image of the human being over here and again the focus is on the feet, right. So, the foot over here is it is almost a close up of the foot.

Again a very metonymic things; so, the entire human body is not represented and so what we get, it is just a foot and the focus is on the foot and it is like a magnification of the foot in a very very cinematic way. And, the feet are covered with withered leaves. So, the leaves have come to an end, the leaves have died a natural death. And along with that we have the example of newspapers from vacant lots. So, remember these are evening newspapers.

So, these are newspapers which do not really have any function anymore, which do not really have any significance anymore. So, there is a degree of liquidation in terms of significance, the liquidation in terms of importance. There is an exhaustion of importance, and exhaustion of significance over here. So, these are newspapers which

are just waste paper because these are this is an evening and by the time the day arrives at an evening most of the news gets consumed.

So, the whole idea, the whole image of being consumed is something which we see over here immediately. The withered leaves have been consumed by time, the newspapers have been consumed by time and these are newspapers which are from the vacant lots. So, these are from the vacant spaces in the narrow passageways. And the newspapers and leaves they are all, sort of clubbed in together and rustling your feet as you walk down that particular neighbourhood.

The showers beat on broken blinds and chimneypots. So, again the broken blinds and broken windows on a chimneypots. So, these are these are homes which presumably do not belong to wealthy people. This is very unlike the space when woman come and go talking on Michelangelo. So, this is not that kind of space, this is not the cultural space rather these are space where in the ordinary hard working, working class people live with narrow passageways, with broken blinds, with chimneypots, with you know dead leaves and newspapers from vacant lot.

So, these are very working class neighbourhoods which has been depicted over here. So, again the very drudgery of the city life, the very very claustrophobic quality of city life which is also decadent in quality is something which we get a very visual picture of. And, by visual I mean very cinematic, if you take a look at the visual grammar over here the politics of representation over here. Eliot seems to be borrowing or drawing heavily on cinema, for instance the whole idea of magnification, the close up, the long shot.

So, we get a long shot of the city which gives you a panoramic view of the city in terms of the uniformity and the standardization and the boredom on the city. And, then take a look at some closer things with the series of close up. So, you have the close up on the foot, the close up on the dirty, you know on the leaves, the dirty newspapers and those close ups and a long shot put together they give you a sense of the boredom, the inertia that is experienced over here.

And the final image of inertia, the final image of boredom, the final image of you know decadence, the final image of being consumed is represented over here with the image of the lonely cab horse, ok. So, at the corner of the street, the lonely cab horse steams and

stamps and then the lightning of the lamps, right. So, there is something almost automatic about this image.

So, the cab horse is in a corner of the street, a lonely cab horse, so it is sort of bonded with something, it is tied to something. So, it is like a bonded labour for instance. It is not free. So, the lonely cab horse over here becomes or may be read as a metaphor of the modern man, modern man who is tied to his compulsions tied to his duties, tied to boredom, tied to inertia, tied to drudgery, tied to reputations, right.

So, this very repetitive ritual of modern life is being represented through the image of the lonely cab horse so, lonely cab horse steams and stamps. So, again there is no forward movement, steaming and stamping is inertia is standing in one particular point and stamping the foot and almost like an automatic movement out of the stamping comes the light, the lighting of the lamps. So, lamps in the street begin to glow immediately, but you know unlike most images of illumination, unlike more traditional images of lightning and illumination and enlightenment this is an image of darkness.

So, the lightning which comes in this neighbourhood with the lonely cab horse steaming and stamping it serves further, it serves to accentuate the darkness further, right. So, it does not really illuminate anything, it does not really give you a sense of hope or the disappearance of despair, nothing of that sort happens, instead what we get is an accentuation of despair. So, the darkness gets accentuated, the darkness gets more highlighted with a light.

So, this is a light which does not throw light onto anything. So, you know again one can think back and connect this to Marlow in heart of darkness, where he comes back as an enlightened person, but his enlightenment is a very negative enlightenment. And, he realizes that you know whatever knowledge he has would be too dark too dark altogether to be conveyed to an uninitiated audience that's why he has to lie to Kurtz's intended if you are remember that section.

So, again we have something similar over here. So, a lightening of the lamps over here does not serve to illuminate anything, it does not some serve to give knowledge, illumination, epiphany of any kind. The only epiphany available in this condition is an epiphany of darkness, an epiphany of nothingness, right. So, that is the only epiphany that is the only knowledge available.

The knowledge of nothingness and that nothingness is depicted through the several material markers, the evening newspapers, the withered leaves, the broken blinds, the lonely horse who is sort of tied to a particular cab for instance and steaming and stamping and no forward movement. So, all that, all these material markers they all come together and it sort of creates an economy of exhaustion so to say, everything is exhausted and spent and used and claustrophobic in this condition, ok.

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T.S. Eliot (1888–1965)

Preludes

I

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
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;
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.

II

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.
With the other masquerades
That times resumes,
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms.

III

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;
They flickered against the ceiling
And when all the world came back
And the light crept up between the shutters
And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands;
Sitting along the bed's edge, where
You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands.

IV

His soul stretched tight across the skies
That fade behind a city block,
Or trampled by insistent feet
At four and five and six o'clock;
And short square fingers stuffing pipes,
And ageing newspapers, and eyes
Assured of certain certainties,
The conscience of a blackened street
Impatient to assume the world.
I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.
Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women



So, that is the first stanza of Eliot's preludes. And so, we are beginning to see how the entire idea the evening settling down, does not create a sense of homeliness, it does not create a sense of warmth, it does not create a sense of domestic bliss instead it creates a sense of despair, a sense of alienation, a sense of brokenness, a sense of fragmentation, which is what we get in the very first stanza.

And I move onto the second stanza, where the speaker says the morning comes to consciousness of faint stale smells of beer, from the sawdust trampled street with all the muddy feet that press to early coffee stands, with the other masquerades that time resumes one thinks of all the hands, that are raising dingy shades in a thousand furnished rooms.

So, again the whole idea the morning coming to consciousness; so, the temporality of the morning which is an abstract thing is being humanized over here. So, we have a human dimension of time. So, the morning is coming to consciousness and again look at the way

in which how traditional markers of positivity like, the lightning of the lamps, consciousness, which are traditionally speaking, conventionally speaking markers of positivity markers of illumination, markers of knowledge, but see how these traditional markers are subverted into something else.

So, how does the morning come to consciousness? The morning comes to consciousness of faint stale smells of beer. So, again beer as depicted over here as this entire idea of consuming alcohol which is stale, which is faint and that gives you a hangover in the morning. So, you wake up with a hangover, you wake up tired, you wake up already heavy in the head. So, it is not really a sprightly start to the day instead it is actually a start of decadence, it is a start of heaviness, a start of a hangover, right, so which is a carryover from the previous day.

Now, this idea of the hangover, this metaphor the hangover is important over here because what it means is you are never really leaving behind your drudgery. You are carrying it forward to the next day, and every day is a continuation of the hangover, every day is a continuation of the drudgery, the continuation of the claustrophobia which is suffered by the subject over here.

So, the whole idea of the whole image of the faint stale smells of beer as an alcoholic drink with which you wake up in the morning and suffer the hangover serves to represent the continuation of drudgery. So, it becomes the metaphor of the continuation of drudgery, the repetitive ritual of drudgery which is being represented over here.

Now, the next image is interesting. We get the sense of the sawdust trampled street. So, it is sawdust trampled, it is dirty and as typically dusty street which is sort of sprinkled with water just to keep the dust down, but of course what that makes, what that you know enables, what that makes is it makes the street dirty and muddy, right. So, in order to keep the street clean, in order to keep the street less dusty, there is an attempt to sprinkle water in it, but that makes things worse and makes things more sticky, more muddy, more dirty, more dingy in quality.

So, from the sawdust trampled street with all this muddy feet that press to early coffee stands. So, again the focus is on the feet. So, never do we see a complete human image. Forget about a human self, even the human body is not represented as a totality over here. So, that just goes to show the extent of fragmentation, the length of fragmentation

which is suffered by modern man, wherein the human self, the human body, the human awareness, the human presence, it is always represented as a metonymic, broken, alienated, incomplete entity. And this incompleteness is important, this interruption is important. So, the human subject can only be an interrupted subject in this drudgery of modernity.

So, a muddy feet that press to early coffee stands; so, the coffee stands over here, they do not become metaphors of healthy consumption they become metaphors of a certain degree of intoxication, a certain degree of addiction. So, you need coffee in the morning to get up and wake up properly and carry on your duties for the day. So, again coffee over here becomes a metaphor for you know certain degree of addictions, certain degree of numbness. So, you know you just de-numb yourself with coffee and then you go on and carry on your duties for the day.

So, the muddy feet pressing towards a coffee stand. So, the morning comes to consciousness, the image of beer, the metaphor of beer over here becomes an image of hangover which is a continuation of drudgery and then you have the whole lot of the sawdust trampled street which is that of a muddy, dirty street. And then here is the muddy feet, which is a very metonymic representation of the human subject, the human body broken down into small fragments into small organs.

And that obviously, undercuts the organicity of the human self, it becomes just an inorganic entity or something almost machinic about its movement, the muddy feet pressing towards the early coffee stands, is almost like a collective movement, a uniform standardized movement towards the coffee stand.

So, uniformity and standardization were the two different, two main mantras of metropolitan life and what those do in a more generic way uniformity and standardization, it takes away individuality and agency, right. So, the individuality and agency they get completely undercut by the whole over reliant on uniformity and standardization. So, the entire collective a body over here, the entire people, all the people who wake up in the morning they are all pressing towards the early coffee stands as one collective organism, right.

So, everyone is moving towards the coffee stand as one collective organism which is tired and exhausted. So, the entire humanity, the entire mankind over here in this

metropolis is represented as one exhausted organism, as one exhausted animal which is pressing towards the coffee stand to rejuvenate itself artificially with caffeine.

With the other masquerades the time resumes. So, masquerades is an important word over here, it means pretentious performances. So, you put on a mask which is to say that you know you are hiding, you are concealing your true self. So, if you again remember the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock while the human subject the very neurotic male subject over there says quite clearly there would be time, and there would be time to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.

So, the entire idea of preparing a face it entails the performative qualities, you have to perform social meetings, you have to perform social exchanges, social pleasantries, right and that is described over here with a word masquerade. So, the entire idea of masquerade are those rituals of pretension, the rituals of politeness with which you carry on your pretentious petty, metropolitan life, right.

So, the other masquerades the time resumes and the word resume over here is interesting because normally when you use the word resume, it normally has a positive connotation, but again look at the way in which certain traditional markers of positivity like, lightning of the lamps, consciousness, you know resuming of something, all these traditional markers of positivity and progress they actually subverted into something which are quite negative in quality.

So, what gets resumed over here? The masquerades; the meaningless rituals of polite performances they get resumed over here. And they are the ones which are repeated over and over again. So, it is like a ritual of repetition and what that collectively does all these markers over here. It gives you a sense of a very Sisyphean condition, very Sisyphean lifestyle you know I am obviously, referring to the myth of Sisyphus, s i s y p h u s, which is very ancient Greek myth, myth of a man doomed to push a stone on top of a hill as you I am sure this is familiar to most of you.

So, the man pushes a stone on top of a hill and every time the stone reaches the top of the hill it just rolls down again. So, he is doomed to forever do something which is completely purposeless. So, the stone will never stay on top of the hill and yet he is doomed to push it all the way up. So, there is something of a Sisyphean quality of this life, lifestyle as well.

So, every day is a repetition of the previous day and an anticipation of the next day, right. So, the masquerades are being resumed by time. So, time becomes a marker of masquerades over here time entails you know this whole idea, the whole markers, the whole repetitive rituals get resumed, right.

So, again this is very similar to the setting that we saw in the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock with exception, with the difference that that particular setting was very bourgeois, was very privileged in quality whereas, this is more working class, more elevated more impoverished in quality. But the mood, the mood of ennui the affect of ennui is very similar in both the poems.

With the other masquerades the time resumes, one thinks of all the hands that are raising dingy shades in a thousand furnished rooms. Again the focus is on the hand. So, again look at the way in which the hand, the foot, the feet they all the human body is just represented through fragments through certain broken parts or certain metonymic images never fully, right.

So, one thinks of all the hands, so all the hands they are collectively raising dingy shades. So, again look at the collective motion which is to say everything is standardized, everything is one collective uniform motion. So, everyone wakes up at the same time, everyone has coffee at the same time, everyone raises a dingy shades at the same time and the last line of this particular stanza in a thousand furnished rooms.

So, all the rooms are supposedly furnished in very similar way; so, thousand furnished room. So, it is obviously hyperbolic in quality, but what that does over here, it gives you a sense of the standardization. See all the rooms are standardized in the same way. So, all the rooms, thousand rooms they are all furnished together in a very similar fashion and in a way that is thinking of all the hands that are raising the dingy shades in all the thousand furnished rooms; so, again the whole idea of uniformity and standardization which obviously, undercuts the agency or the individuality of the human subjects.

So, in other words this metro metropolitan lifestyle, this metropolitan space does not offer you any agency, you just become a cog in the wheel in its machinery of modernity and where your only job is to carry on the rituals, a little petty metropolitan rituals which are collectively done by all the human beings. So, the human beings do not seem to have any agency, there is no break from that motion, there is no break from the collective

motion of ennui. So, you just become a cog in the wheel in this process of modernity, this machinery of modernity which is being represented in a first two stanzas.

So, I stop at this point today. And, the next lecture we will hopefully conclude this poem with the last two stanzas.

Thank you for your attention.