Portrait of a Lady

POEM TEXT

Thou hast committed —
Fornication: but that was in another country,
And besides, the wench is dead.
(The Jew of Malta)

I
Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon
You have the scene arrange itself — as it will seem to do—
With "I have saved this afternoon for you";
And four wax candles in the darkened room,
Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,
An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb
Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid.
We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole
Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips.
"So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul
Should be resurrected only among friends
Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom
That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room."
—And so the conversation slips
Among velleities and carefully caught regrets
Through attenuated tones of violins
Mingled with remote cornets
And begins.

"You do not know how much they mean to me, my friends,
And how, how rare and strange it is, to find
In a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends,
(For indeed I do not love it ... you knew? you are not blind!
How keen you are!)
To find a friend who has these qualities,
Who has, and gives
Those qualities upon which friendship lives.
How much it means that I say this to you —
Without these friendships — life, what *cauchemar*!"
Among the winding of the violins
And the ariettes
Of cracked cornets
Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins
Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own,
Capricious monotone
That is at least one definite "false note."
— Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance,
Admire the monuments,
Discuss the late events,
Correct our watches by the public clocks.
Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks.

II
Now that lilacs are in bloom
She has a bowl of lilacs in her room
And twists one in her fingers while she talks.
"Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know
What life is, you who hold it in your hands";
(Slowly twisting the lilac stalks)
"You let it flow from you, you let it flow,
And youth is cruel, and has no remorse
And smiles at situations which it cannot see."
I smile, of course,
And go on drinking tea.
"Yet with these April sunsets, that somehow recall
My buried life, and Paris in the Spring,
I feel immeasurably at peace, and find the world
To be wonderful and youthful, after all."

The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune
Of a broken violin on an August afternoon:
"I am always sure that you understand
My feelings, always sure that you feel,
Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand.

You are invulnerable, you have no Achilles' heel.
You will go on, and when you have prevailed
You can say: at this point many a one has failed.

But what have I, but what have I, my friend,
To give you, what can you receive from me?
Only the friendship and the sympathy
Of one about to reach her journey's end.

I shall sit here, serving tea to friends ...."

I take my hat: how can I make a cowardly amends
For what she has said to me?
You will see me any morning in the park
Reading the comics and the sporting page.
Particularly I remark.
An English countess goes upon the stage.
A Greek was murdered at a Polish dance,
Another bank defaulter has confessed.
I keep my countenance,
I remain self-possessed
Except when a street-piano, mechanical and tired
Reiterates some worn-out common song
With the smell of hyacinths across the garden
Recalling things that other people have desired.
Are these ideas right or wrong?

III

The October night comes down; returning as before
Except for a slight sensation of being ill at ease
I mount the stairs and turn the handle of the door
And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees.
"And so you are going abroad; and when do you return?
But that's a useless question.
You hardly know when you are coming back,
You will find so much to learn."
My smile falls heavily among the bric-à-brac.

"Perhaps you can write to me."
My self-possession flares up for a second;
This is as I had reckoned.
"I have been wondering frequently of late
(But our beginnings never know our ends!)
Why we have not developed into friends."
I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark
Suddenly, his expression in a glass.
My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark.

"For everybody said so, all our friends,
They all were sure our feelings would relate
So closely! I myself can hardly understand.
We must leave it now to fate.
You will write, at any rate.
Perhaps it is not too late.
I shall sit here, serving tea to friends."
And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression ... dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.
Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance—
Well! and what if she should die some afternoon,
Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose;
Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand
With the smoke coming down above the housetops;
Doubtful, for quite a while
Not knowing what to feel or if I understand
Or whether wise or foolish, tardy or too soon ...
Would she not have the advantage, after all?
This music is successful with a "dying fall"
Now that we talk of dying—
And should I have the right to smile?

SUMMARY

"You have had extramarital sex, but it was in a different country, and the woman is dead anyways." — Quotation from *The Jew of Malta*, a play by Christopher Marlow.

Part I

On a smoggy December afternoon, the setting appears to set itself up on its own, as it always does, with sayings like "I have reserved this time for you" and four candles casting halos of light on the ceiling of an otherwise dark room. Reminiscent of the tomb where Juliet (of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*) died, the ambiance of the room is perfect for all the things that will be said (or not said) there. Let's say that we just went to a performance by whichever Polish musician is now in fashion, and watched as his expression flowed through his body. "This piece by Chopin is so deep and personal that it should only be played in the company of two or three friends, people who won't agitate such a beautiful, delicate piece, which is disrupted in a larger venue." Our conversation meanders through the surface level of our thoughts and feelings, all while muffled horns and violins play in the background.

"You don't know how important my friends are to me, and how difficult it is, while leading a life made up of such random, meaningless activities (I don't love this sort of lifestyle... You were already aware? You do pay attention, after all! You're so perceptive!) to find a friend who has the right characteristics—someone who both possesses and gives the qualities necessary for a meaningful friendship. In fact, it's so important that I'll tell you this: without true friendships, life is a nightmare!" Amidst the winding violins and little melodies of damaged horns, a dull drum starts beating its own song inside my head. This song is prone to sudden changes, but it is still prolonged, boring, and inexpressive, with at least one

incorrectly-played note. Let's get some air, all while in a gaze of tobacco smoke, and admire the local landmarks, talk about current events, adjust our watches using public clocks, and then sit around drinking beer for half an hour.

II

Now that lilacs are in season, the lady displays them in her room, fiddling with one as she speaks. "Oh, my friend, you don't really understand life, even though it's right in front of you." (She continues twisting the lilac stems.) "You go with the flow, letting life pass by. Youth is callous and doesn't feel guilt, and it brashly smiles in the face of things it does not recognize or understand." As one might expect, I continue smiling and sipping my tea. "Still, the sunsets in April remind me of my own youth, long gone, and Paris during Spring, so I feel extremely peaceful, and find that the world *is* actually delightful and youthful in the end."

Her voice starts again like the unrelenting, off-key song of a broken violin on an afternoon in August. "I'm always certain that you understand my emotions, always certain that you perceive them, certain that you reach out to me across this gap.

"Nothing can hurt you, because you have no fatal flaw. You'll just keep living your life, and when you have succeeded, you can say: many other people have failed at this point.

"But what do I have, what do I have, to offer you, my friend? What can you glean from me? Just the companionship and compassion of someone nearing death.

"So I'll keep sitting here, drinking tea with my friends."

I got my hat, preparing to leave. How can I timidly make up for what she's just told me? I spend each morning in the park, reading the comics and sports sections of the newspaper. In particular, I've noticed the following headlines: an English noblewoman is becoming an actress, a Greek person was killed at a Polish dance, and another person who failed to repay a bank loan has admitted wrongdoing. I maintain my outward composure and control over my emotions—that is, until a worn-out, mechanized piano on the street starts reciting a stale and overplayed song. Its tune mingles with the fragrance of hyacinths, reminding me of things that *other people* long for. I'm left wondering whether their romantic desires are right or wrong.

III

The October evening descends, and I go back to her home. This trip is similar to those before, except that I feel slight discomfort. I climb the stairs and open the door, feeling defeated, like I've been brought to my hands and knees. "So, you'll be traveling abroad. When will you get back? But that's a silly thing to ask, as you probably don't know, and you'll find so much to explore while you're away." With great effort, I smile at all her knickknacks.

"Maybe you'll be able to write me letters." My self-assurance comes back in a momentary flash, as I'd expected this sort of romantic advance. "I've been wondering lately (but when we start something, we never know how it will turn out in the end!) why the two of us haven't developed a real friendship." I feel like a person who smiles and turns around only to be suddenly taken aback by the expression he sees in the mirror. My self-assurance falters; we're in a state of complete ignorance.

"Because everyone said we would, all of our mutual friends. They were all certain that we would empathize with one another! I struggle to understand it myself. But now, we must leave our relationship in the hands of fate. Besides, you will write, and maybe our relationship can be salvaged yet. In the meantime, I'll keep sitting here, drinking tea with my friends." I have to adopt the behavior of others in order to express myself, dancing like a dancing bear, crying out like a parrot, and babbling like an ape. Let's get some air in a haze of tobacco smoke. Well then! What if she dies on a gray and hazy afternoon and enters a more pleasant, yellow and pink evening atmosphere? What if she leaves me sitting with a pen in my hand, smog drifting down from the rooftops, unsure of my feelings, my knowledge, my wisdom or foolishness, hastiness or lateness... If that were to happen, wouldn't she have the upper-hand in the end? The music gradually decreases in volume, in a "dying fall," as this talk of death has reminded me... And should I be entitled to smile?

THEMES

THE SHALLOWNESS AND MONOTONY OF MODERN LIFE

The speaker of “Portrait of a Lady” reflects on his last three meetings with an older female acquaintance. Though they enjoy the benefits of modern society—especially its emphasis on intellectualism, the arts, and leisure—both figures’ daily lives are repetitive and tiresome, and they seem to drift through their cultured routines in a disconnected haze. The meaninglessness of their day-to-day existences leaves both the speaker and the lady feeling dissatisfied, and through this, the poem suggests that modern life is a tedious, shallow, and ultimately unfulfilling affair.

Both the speaker and the lady partake in fashionable modern activities, yet their lifestyles are boring and repetitive:

- Describing his first visit to the lady’s home, the speaker says that “the scene arrange[s] itself — as it will seem to do,” suggesting that their interactions feel entirely predictable.
- He adds that he and the lady “have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole” play music, using nonspecific language to suggest that their outings are generic and uninteresting; he could swap in any number of

events in for this concert and the gist of the scene wouldn't change.

Boredom and repetition are not confined to the speaker and the lady's visits, either, but pervade these characters' daily lives:

- Once the speaker escapes his conversation with the lady, he can only hope to embark on another series of mundane activities. He proposes "admir[ing] the monuments" and "discuss[ing] the late events," for example, and also says that he can be seen "any morning in the park."
- Meanwhile, the lady is always sitting in the same place, "serving tea to friends."

Again, then, it seems that the leisurely activities of modern life blend together, becoming nothing but expected routines that leave both the speaker and the lady feeling unimpressed and unfulfilled:

- Despite having just experienced a wonderful rendition of Chopin, for instance, the speaker is bored throughout this visit, a "dull" drum playing a "monotone" tune in his head the whole time. He lives his life in a sort of "tobacco trance," a directionless haze of leisure and routine.
- Similarly, the lady remarks that her life is "composed so much, so much of odds and ends." In other words, her life is constructed or artificial, made up of meaningless frivolities that she admittedly "[does] not love."

The poem thus suggests that modern life, though full of culture and leisure, can't give the speaker or the lady the sense of meaning or fulfillment they crave. Instead, the tedium and superficiality of the speaker and the lady's daily lives leave them feeling jaded and listless.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40
- Lines 41-43
- Lines 56-57
- Line 68
- Lines 71-83
- Lines 84-87
- Line 92
- Line 108
- Lines 114-115
- Lines 116-121

PROPRIETY, COMMUNICATION, AND ISOLATION

The poem suggests that emotional intimacy offers a reprieve from the meaninglessness of high society life, yet the interactions between the young man and the lady are as superficial and dull as the monotonous activities that fill their days. Throughout their awkward interactions, it becomes clear that their commitment to being polite and "proper" holds them back from open and honest communication, and thus from experiencing the intimacy required to form fulfilling relationships.

Genuine relationships appear to be the only hope for a break from the superficiality and meaninglessness of both characters' social lives:

- The lady explains that without strong friendships, life is a nightmare (or, as she puts it, "life, what *cauchemar*!").
- The speaker reveals a similar desire for intimacy, losing his confidence when the lady notes that the two of them haven't formed a bond and the speaker realizes that he might be "in the dark" when it comes to fostering genuine relationships.

Yet even as these characters seem to crave emotional connection, such connection is "rare and strange" in upper-class circles that reward propriety and formality:

- Both the speaker and the lady seem more concerned with what's fashionable and respectable than with having an authentic interaction. They use hifalutin language to talk about "the latest" music and regularly sit around drinking tea, for example.
- Both also express a desire to live up to *other's* expectations: the lady keeps trying to form a relationship with the speaker because "everybody said [that they would], all our friends!" The speaker, meanwhile, measures his own desires against those of "other people" and is constantly concerned with his "countenance," or the way he comes across to others.

Because neither party is able to speak openly and honestly, both miss out on the chance for what might have been a meaningful relationship:

- While the lady attempts to share her feelings with the young man, for example, she does so only indirectly, and this drives him away. For instance, she implies that he does not possess the attributes necessary for true friendship by explaining that it is rare "To find a friend who has these qualities, / Who has, and gives / Those qualities upon which friendship lives." The lady resists simply expressing

her emotional needs, and her roundabout language irks the speaker and prompts him to leave.
- Meanwhile, the young man will not admit his distaste for the lady, which would be offensive according to upper-class etiquette. Instead, he goes on smiling, pretending that all is well, which she sees as disingenuous and immature.
- Both characters' commitment to the rules of "polite society" thus leaves them unable to speak honestly with one another.

The one thing the lady does seem to be upfront about is their *failure* to form an emotional connection. But when the young man is faced with his own lack of emotional intelligence, he remarks, "I must borrow every changing shape / to find expression…" In other words, he is so unsure of how to handle emotional expression—and so mired in social convention—that he resorts to mimicking the behaviors of others.

In the end, it's clear that the value that their social circles place on respectability, politeness, and formality prevents the young man and the lady from the communication required of genuine relationships. Both characters display a profound discomfort and distaste for sincerity and authenticity, which prevents them from finding the emotional intimacy they crave.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-40
- Between Lines 40-41
- Lines 41-83
- Between Lines 83-84
- Lines 84-124

THE PITFALLS OF YOUTH

The older lady of the poem's title suggests that the speaker's nonchalant approach to life is immature and dangerous. Young people, the lady implies, aren't nearly as invincible as they think they are—and are in fact dangerously blind to the struggles that the future may hold. By contrast, the lady says that old age grants wisdom and perspective that the speaker would do well to heed—lest he end up lonely and regretful like her. Ultimately, the poem implies, young people lack the experience required to make the most of their lives while they still can. In other words, youth is wasted on the young.

The lady believes that young people take their youth for granted and don't fully think through the repercussions of their decisions:

- She tells the speaker that young people "do not know / What life is, you who hold it in your hands." Instead, they "let it flow," allowing youth to pass them by rather than actively and thoughtfully building a future.
- She also repeatedly hints that there is a good chance that the speaker's youthful rashness will end in disaster. She ominously says that "our beginnings never know our ends" and that "youth […] smiles at situations which it cannot see," implying that young people 's (willful) ignorance makes them overly optimistic about the future.
- She even compares the speaker to a demi-god, sarcastically saying, "You are invulnerable, you have no Achilles heel." The lady is suggesting that the speaker is more fallible than he thinks he is, and thus that he should think more carefully about his actions—especially as "many a one" on the same path "has failed" before him.

The lady's own loneliness late in life is a testament to the perils of a wasted youth. The lady suggests that she was never able to find meaning and connection as a younger woman, and thus is left sitting in the same spot mournfully "serving tea to friends" throughout her final days. This might be the young man's fate too, should he disregard her warning to live more thoughtfully.

Yet time *also* granted the lady the wisdom and experience that she once lacked. Through this, the lady seems to find peace and acceptance in her old age, saying in response to her past, "I feel immeasurably at peace, and find the world / To be wonderful and youthful, after all." The painful irony here is that the lady has learned to appreciate her life and see the wonder of youth only after it's gone—and it seems she fears that the speaker will face the same fate.

The speaker's response to the lady's comments confirms her fears about his immaturity. Instead of taking her advice to heart, he seems to carry on with his frivolous routines:

- For example, immediately after her comment about youth "smil[ing] at situations which it cannot see," the young man "smile[s], of course, and go[es] on drinking tea." The speaker openly defies her advice, exhibiting the very youthful pride and arrogance that she warns him against.
- During their final visit, the lady confronts his inability to form close relationships, and his immediate response is to reenter a "tobacco trance," wasting his youth with absentmindedness. Shaken by the lady's comments but resistant to adopting her advice, the speaker is left "not knowing what to feel" by the end of the poem.

Without the maturity and perspective necessary to put the lady's teachings into practice, the speaker will continue to lead a rudderless existence—only understanding the preciousness of his youth after it's gone.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Line 6
- Lines 36-40
- Lines 41-55
- Lines 61-83
- Line 97
- Line 101
- Lines 107-108
- Lines 114-124

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1

Thou hast committed —
Fornication: but that was in another country,
And besides, the wench is dead.
(The Jew of Malta)

"Portrait of a Lady" makes two allusions that set up the poem before it even begins. These allusions introduce some of the poem's key themes and motifs, such as romance, guilt, class, and death.

The first allusion is the poem's title itself, which recalls Henry James's 1881 novel *The Portrait of a Lady*:

- The plot revolves around Isabel Archer, a young and fiercely independent American woman who attempts to make her own way traveling throughout Europe.
- Isabel is pursued by a number of eligible suitors who offer increased wealth and status, but she politely turns them down in hopes of maintaining her freedom.
- By the time the book ends, however, Isabel has inherited a great deal of money and been deceived into marrying a man who is after her new wealth.

Like Isabel, the speaker of Eliot's poem tries to maintain his independence by traveling and rebuffing romantic advances, but, in doing so, he gives up the opportunity for fulfilling relationships and is left only with empty relationships and social rituals. The allusion to Isabel in the poem's title thus calls attention to her similarities with the *speaker*—and *not* with the lady, as one might expect! Indeed, this "Portrait of a Lady" shapes up to really be a portrait of the speaker, and it suggests that he will share Isabel's bleak fate if he doesn't heed the lady's warnings.

The poem itself then opens with an epigraph, which is adapted from Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta*. This drama follows a Maltese Jewish Merchant named Barabas, who goes on a murder spree after having his fortunes stripped away by the local government. In this extract from Act IV, two friars confront Barabas, accusing him of murder. He responds by interrupting them and admitting to a number of lesser, unrelated crimes such as extramarital sex. The original quote thus has multiple speakers:

Friar Barnadine: Thou has committed—
Barabas: Fornication: but that was in another country;
And besides, the wench is dead.

Because the dialogue is combined in the epigraph, its speaker seems to interrupt and argue against *himself*. Fittingly enough, given this opening epigraph, the speaker of "Portrait of a Lady" will go on to question and contradict himself throughout the poem.

LINES 1-7

Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon
You have the scene arrange itself — as it will seem to do—
With "I have saved this afternoon for you";
And four wax candles in the darkened room,
Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,
An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb
Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid.

The poem begins in December, when the speaker enters the home of a lady with whom he shares a complicated relationship. The speaker sets the scene here, immediately establishing a gloomy mood through the imagery of thick smoke clouds hovering over a stark winter landscape. The speaker in fact positions the lady's home "among" the smog, carrying this atmosphere *into* that home.

As he steps inside, the speaker then indicates that he's familiar with this setting: "the scene arrange[s] itself — as it will seem to do," he says:

- This phrasing implies that he's been here before, and that the scene always looks the same. This, in turn, reflects how *repetitive* these interactions are. The fact that the speaker calls this a "scene" also suggests it's something carefully staged for a particular purpose.
- It's clear, then, that these meetings aren't genuinely intimate, vulnerable, or exciting. This is space is perfectly arranged for conversations of little substance.

The lady clearly attempts to create a romantic ambiance—lighting candles in an otherwise dark room and declaring that she's set aside the entire afternoon for the speaker. Yet the room has the "atmosphere of Juliet's tomb," the speaker says:

- This allusion to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* reinforces the idea that the lady and the speaker are each just playing a "role" and not being open with each other, leaving much "unsaid." And, of course, that play's title characters both die in a tragic tale of doomed romance—which hardly bodes well for this relationship!
- What kills Romeo and Juliet is essentially a failure of communication—subtly suggesting that the speaker and lady's lack of openness will result in their downfall.

The repetition that appears throughout this passage reinforces the notion that this setting is familiar and that these meetings are monotonous. For instance, the speaker says that the room is perfect for all that will be "said, or left unsaid":

- This is an example of polyptoton, and it also creates juxtaposition between what the speaker and lady express to each and what they keep hidden.
- The sharp contrast between the subjects that will and will not be discussed suggests that there are strict rules that govern their conversations.

The poem's opening lines also establish its overarching iambic (da-DUM) rhythm:

> Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon
> You have the scene arrange itself — as it will seem to do—

While line *lengths* vary, the iambic meter is very consistent here, reflecting the predictability and restriction of their interactions; they cannot speak freely but must arrange their words carefully, so that they flow in an acceptable, pre-established manner.

LINES 8-13

> *We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole*
> *Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips.*
> *"So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul*
> *Should be resurrected only among friends*
> *Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom*
> *That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room."*

The speaker describes the concert that he and the lady have just attended, where the "latest" Polish pianist played "the Preludes":

- That the speaker refers to this musician as "the latest" suggests that he is the most fashionable musician of the time. This, in turn, implies that the speaker and lady are clued into the "latest" cultural and artistic trends.
- But "latest" is also a very vague, nonspecific description, which the speaker himself dismisses with the interjection "let us say." This suggests that the musician's exact identity doesn't really matter, perhaps because this musician will be replaced shortly anyway. As such, the word choice here reinforces the *emptiness* of upper-class social rituals like going to see the hottest new artist.
- Also note how the speaker's interjection contains another example of polytpoton, resonating with "said or left unsaid" from the previous line. This repetition of the root word "say" reinforces just how circular and empty the speaker and the lady's conversations are, given that they cannot directly state their true feelings.

The lady gives her take on the pieces they have just heard, alluding to Frédéric Chopin. An icon of Romantic-era music to this day, Chopin is known for his passionate and expressive compositions and high-profile love affairs:

- The lady plays up the romantic atmosphere that his music suggests, referring to his song as a "bloom"—a metaphor that highlights its fragility, equating the music with a symbol of new life—and saying that the piece brings back Chopin's "soul."
- The image of the pianist playing "through his hair and finger-tips" further portrays him as exceedingly expressive and the music as highly personal, as if emanating from within.
- As such, this passage introduces music as a symbol of intimacy within the context of the poem.

The lady specifically links the very personal and "intimate" nature of Chopin's music with its delicacy—his music is "so intimate," she says, that it must only be performed in small spaces. As she elaborates, the lady comes across as disdainful of the lower classes:

- She contrasts the "friends / Some two or three" that she believes would make an appropriate audience for his melodies with the masses of the "concert room" who would "rub" or agitate it.
- This juxtaposition exaggerates the difference between those who are and are not "worthy" of hearing the song, according to the lady.

Sound devices appear throughout this passage, reinforcing the speaker's descriptions of music. For instance, note the alliteration and consonance in lines 8-9:

> We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole
> Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and
> finger-tips.

The resulting cacophony suggests that the tune the speaker mentions might not be so melodious and beautiful after all, at least from his perspective.

LINES 14-18

—And so the conversation slips
Among velleities and carefully caught regrets
Through attenuated tones of violins
Mingled with remote cornets
And begins.

Following the lady's comments about how delicate the music is (and how insensitive the lower classes are), the speaker indicates that their conversation continues on in this stilted and pretentious manner. It seems that, within the speaker's head, the sound of the lady's voice combines with the muffled music that plays in the background. As he puts it, their "conversation slips [...] Through attenuated tones of violins / Mingled with remote cornets."

- The fact that the cadences of the song and the conversation become nearly indiscernible to the speaker suggests that their conversation becomes increasingly personal (remember that music has recently been established as a symbol of romance and intimacy).
- Their conversation "slips" out of the speaker's control and meanders through such sentimental matters as impulse and regret.
- At the same time, however, the speaker and the lady manage to "carefully" catch their emotions before they reveal too much (thus also ensuring that impulses remain unrealized "velleities"—vague wishes with no real effort behind them).

While most of this poem is made up of end-stopped lines, this passage contains a great deal of enjambment:

- Enjambment creates the impression of long, sprawling sentences that tumble down the pages. It also speeds up the reading process, causing the reader's gaze to shift back and forth across the page rapidly.
- The structure of this passage thus reflects the winding nature of their conversation—always circling around what they want to say, but never getting there.

As elsewhere, these lines contain dense sound play and an iambic rhythm, which contribute to the poem's musicality and reinforce its auditory imagery (i.e., its descriptions of songs):

—And so the conversation slips
Among velleities and carefully caught regrets

Enjambment allows the bouncy rhythm to pick up momentum here, but the repeating consonant sounds throughout this passage are not quite lighthearted. Take, for instance, the sharp alliteration and consonance of /k/ and /t/ sounds in lines 15-16:

Among velleities and carefully caught regrets
Through attenuated tones of violins

The hard, plosive sounds give this passage an almost violent, bitter mood, reinforcing the suggestion that the speaker finds their roundabout, romantic conversation grating. Perhaps the tension between the bouncy iamb and the percussive consonance can be said to reflect the disparity between the speaker and the lady's aims throughout their interaction: she strives for closeness, while he maintains distance at all costs.

LINES 19-28

"You do not know how much they mean to me, my friends,
And how, how rare and strange it is, to find
In a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends,
(For indeed I do not love it ... you knew? you are not blind!
How keen you are!)
To find a friend who has these qualities,
Who has, and gives
Those qualities upon which friendship lives.
How much it means that I say this to you —
Without these friendships — life, what
cauchemar
!"

As the conversation meanders, the lady expresses her profound appreciation for true friendship, presenting it as a cure of sorts for an otherwise arbitrary, unfulfilling life. But at the same time, she comments on how hard it is to find people who have the qualities for such a deep connection.

The lady's statements contain lots repetition, which makes her seem confident and insistent in certain moments, but totally unsure in others!

- For example, she laments the fact that her life is "composed so much, so much of odds and ends." Here, repetition helps the lady convey just *how much* of her life is made up of meaningless activities.
- Similarly, alliteration places additional emphasis on statements like "how much they mean to me my friends."
- In these moments, repetition highlights the necessity of close relationships, increasing the persuasive impact of the lady's argument.

However, her repetition in other moments suggests hesitation, as if she's *really* trying to get at another idea, but struggling with how to say it discreetly. For instance, in lines 24-26, she uses a sort of circular logic, essentially saying, "you need to find a

friend who has the qualities you need in a friend":

> To find a friend who has these qualities,
> Who has, and gives
> Those qualities upon which friendship lives."

Repetition also draws out the lady's musings, reflecting the speaker's perception of her as a woman who drones on and on without saying anything of substance. Plus, the lady uses variations on the word "friend" (an example of polyptoton) so many times that it seems like she is using it as a catch-all term for intimate relationships.

- Since she addresses the speaker and seems nervous throughout this passage, it's reasonable to assume that she's talking about the speaker—perhaps she points out his failure to exhibit the qualities she's looking for, or his potential to fit the role she describes, or both.
- Whatever the case, she warns him that genuine friendships are important and indicates that she's seeking a deep connection.
- Yet the lady *also* dances around the fact that she's looking for someone special—someone who form a deep relationship with her and play an important role in her life—which would likely be considered too "forward" to state outright.

Within this broader discussion of her desire for friendship, the lady also muses on her dissatisfaction with her current lifestyle, something she metaphorically to describes as being "composed so much, so much of odds and ends":

- In suggesting that her life is made up of random material items and scraps, this metaphor ties her dissatisfaction to the random items that fill her home, perhaps suggesting that wealth and status are not enough to keep her company.
- The word "composed" also recalls the musical imagery that appears elsewhere in the poem, a representation of romance and expression. This might subtly hint that she's being overly sentimental, as such music tortures the speaker. In any case, "composed" plays up the fact that her life is laid out for her, like she is playing a part.

The lady blames the meaningless routines of modern life for making true friendship so difficult to seek out—it seems that superficial social activities give rise to superficial relationships. But note that there's a tinge of irony in the lady's statements, as she continues speaking in a very "composed" way, not necessarily exhibiting the kind of emotional vulnerability that she suggests "friendship lives" upon.

Finally, when the speaker indicates that he could tell that the lady isn't all that fond of her lifestyle, she responds, "you knew? you are not blind! / How keen you are." The repetition of "you" briefly focuses the audience's attention on the speaker, whom the lady jokingly compliments for picking up on a plainly evident reality. The verbal irony contained in her statement allows her to put the speaker in his place, or perhaps flirt with him. In any case, she lightly insults him—but in a socially acceptable way, couching it as a sarcastic compliment.

LINES 29-35

> *Among the winding of the violins*
> *And the ariettes*
> *Of cracked cornets*
> *Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins*
> *Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own,*
> *Capricious monotone*
> *That is at least one definite "false note."*

As their conversation goes on, a song starts "hammering" in the speaker's head, mingling with the classical music that plays in the background. This tapestry of sensory impressions in the speaker's mind arises from the poem's stream of consciousness narrative style, which records the speaker's reactions to the poem's events in real-time.

The audience might see this song—which he describes as boring or "dull"—as a response to the lady's speech:

- The violent word "hammering" paints a vivid picture of the distress that these interactions with the lady cause the speaker.
- But, of course, the song doesn't *literally* "hammer" inside the speaker's head. Instead, this can be taken as a metaphor for how the lady's statements, the music, and the overall ambience of this meeting come across to the speaker. The speaker seems not just bored but actively *repulsed* by the lady's musings about friendship.
- The speaker also refers to the song in his head as a "capricious monotone"—an example of an oxymoron, as "capricious" signifies volatility, while a "monotone" goes unchanged. The speaker thus seems to think that the lady is emotionally volatile, but also *predictable*, and he tires of her quickly.

Note that the speaker mentioned "violins" and "cornets" back in lines 16-17, when his conversation with the lady first began. Now, those same instruments are worn-out—"cracked" and needing to be tuned. This suggests that they have been played to the point of exhaustion:

- Still, the "winding of the violins" and melodious "ariettes" of the classical music seem sweet when placed next to the percussive "hammering" that now plagues the speaker's mind.

- This juxtaposition (between the hammering and classical music) calls attention to the difference between the *lady's* perception of their conversations (and, perhaps, of romance and intimacy in general) and those of the *speaker*, represented by the two very different strains of music that mingle in his head.

The sounds of these lines themselves play up the speaker's distress. For example, the assonance of long vowel sounds draw things out, giving the impression of an endless conversation. The speaker describes "the winding of the violins [...] Inside my brain," for instance.

LINES 36-40

— Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance,
Admire the monuments,
Discuss the late events,
Correct our watches by the public clocks.
Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks.

Tiring of their conversion, the speaker wants to leave the lady's home, with its stiflingly romantic atmosphere and overly sentimental conversations (in the speaker's mind, at least). He'd prefer to go outside, into a more impersonal public space. He proposes, "Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance," before listing a series of humdrum activities such as talking about current events, setting his watch, and drinking.

- The use of the collective pronoun "our" here makes it seem like the speaker is talking to himself. It might be more accurate to say that he's *reassuring* himself—reminding himself that he can return to his typical routines to make himself feel better, and encouraging himself to muster up the strength to leave.

And yet, he proposes entering a "tobacco trance," which recalls the "smoke and fog" that the speaker describes filling the city before he enters the lady's home way back in line 1. The word "trance" also suggests that the speaker lives his life in a daze, not really thinking about his actions (which, the poem implies, are so predictable that they don't actually matter to him all that much). All this produces a sense of dramatic irony:

- The speaker thinks that in going outside he's escaping the boredom of the lady's house and getting some "air," but the audience realizes that he's just moving from one vapid, suffocating space to another.
- In fact, his activities outside the lady's home seem just as routine and conformist as anything the lady does: he sets his watch to the publicly-specified correct time, for instance, and is concerned with being up-to-date and in-the-know regarding the latest "events."
- The fact that all of these events take place in public, out in "the air," also reflects the speaker's desire to keep up appearances—to look proper and respectable to other people.

On a formal level, these lines feature parallelism: the speaker repeats the same grammatical structure to describe each activity. This accentuates the fact that the speaker is confined by routine and convention, even when he believes that he's breaking free.

Similarly, the return to end-stopped lines here reflects the rigid, predictable nature of all the activities that the speaker mentions. The consistent iambic meter and rhymes throughout these lines further reinforces the rigidity, conformity, and predictability of the speaker's lifestyle.

At the same time, hard, consonance of /t/ and /k/ sounds make his statements sound bitter and resentful, as in line 36:

> — Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance,

LINES 41-45

Now that lilacs are in bloom
She has a bowl of lilacs in her room
And twists one in her fingers while she talks.
"Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know
What life is, you who hold it in your hands";

Several months have elapsed by the time the poem's second section opens, as the speaker returns to the lady's home in the spring (remember that the poem opened on a foggy "December afternoon"). Now, the lady fiddles with lilac stems as she discusses youthful ignorance with the speaker.

The mood seems neutral or even pleasant at first, thanks to the image of blooming lilacs. Soft consonance reflects the calm atmosphere:

> Now that lilacs are in bloom
> She has a bowl of lilacs in her room

When the lady begins to speak, however, the mood changes. The lilacs here symbolize youth, which the lady "twists" in her hands—a rather violent, painful image that makes her talk about the pitfalls of youth all the more ominous. The speaker, she says, has no idea what it means to be alive despite having so much life right there before him:

> "Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know
> What life is, you who hold it in your hands";

This metaphor treats life as something that can be *possessed* and therefore *lost*. The image of the lady twisting that flower

stem (which, again, represents youth), reinforces this sense of life's fragility—the possibility that it will be agitated and misused, especially by the young who "hold it."

- Interestingly, though the lady claims that the speaker possesses life, *she's* the one who "hold[s] it" and manipulates it—perhaps an attempt to show the speaker her superior wisdom and some degree of control over his fate.

There are hints throughout this section that the speaker is either more easily annoyed than he was during his previous visit, or that the lady is growing increasingly insufferable—or both! Note, for instance, how her first line of dialogue here begins with a stressed syllable:

"Ah, my friend [...]

This break from the poem's iambic (da-DUM) rhythm suggests that she is being emotional, insistent, or otherwise forward with the speaker.

Repetition (specifically epizeuxis) and alliteration also make her claim that "you do not know, you do not know" all the more emphatic, as if she's aggressively calling out the speaker's ignorance. The repetition also builds tension as the audience waits to learn what the speaker "[does] not know."

Finally, enjambment heightens this feeling of suspense, as the audience must read on to learn what the speaker is ignorant of (that is, the truths of life). Yet at the same time that she criticizes his ignorance, the lady calls him "my friend," reinforcing the sense that their conversations aren't truly open and authentic.

LINES 46-51

(Slowly twisting the lilac stalks)
"You let it flow from you, you let it flow,
And youth is cruel, and has no remorse
And smiles at situations which it cannot see."
I smile, of course,
And go on drinking tea.

The lady continues to twist her lilac stems—and the fact that she now does so "slowly" builds suspense. This image reinforces the fragility of youth (which, again, is symbolized by that delicate flower she holds in her hands). The actual of line 36 reinforce the ominous mood, with the cacophonous mix of sinister /s/, biting /t/ and /k/, and liquid /l/ consonance:

(Slowly twisting the lilac stalks)

The lady goes on to claim that the speaker doesn't fully understand life because he just lets its pass him by—lets it "flow"—thoughtlessly. She also says that "youth" is unfeeling, and that it "smiles at situations which it cannot see." This is perhaps meant to indicate that youth is willfully, blissfully ignorant of the realities of the world. (Also note how she speaks of being young almost as if it's some debilitating condition here!)

The lady's highly metaphorical language can be hard to parse, which reflects the notion that struggles to say what she really means (likely because speaking plainly would be considered rude or improper). The repetition in line 47—"you let it flow from you, you let it flow"—adds to this sense of flowery, roundabout phrasing is. She comes across as very concerned with presenting everything in this pleasant, or at least palatable, way (even as her sentimental phrasing seems, ironically enough, to offend the speaker's sensibilities).

- At the same time, the repetition in these statements (especially of the word "you") highlights her intense focus on the speaker, making it seem as though he's being bombarded, targeted, and overwhelmed with her critiques.

The speaker responds to the lady's warnings with defiance:

I smile, of course,
And go on drinking tea.

The speaker thus seems to confirm the lady's worst fears about him: that he mindlessly smiles rather than trying to understand or engage with her point:

- The lady has just implied that young people who blindly smile are cruel, yet such a smile is the speaker's natural reaction; "of course" he does it. The smile suggests that the speaker doesn't care about the lady's evaluations of him and of youth in general, yet his smile also seems to confirm that everything she's just said!
- This situational irony calls attention to the disparity between the speaker and the lady's perception of events—she's making a good-faith attempt at connection while he seems to mock her.

The rhymes between "see" and "tea" as well as "remorse" and "of course" stand out to the reader's ear, and draw a starker contrast between the lady's *advice* and the speaker's subsequent *actions*.

LINES 52-60

"Yet with these April sunsets, that somehow recall
My buried life, and Paris in the Spring,
I feel immeasurably at peace, and find the world
To be wonderful and youthful, after all."
The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune

Of a broken violin on an August afternoon:
"I am always sure that you understand
My feelings, always sure that you feel,
Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand.

The lady says that she's found peace and comfort in the spring months, describing them in sentimental terms. Spring, she says, helps to unearth her "buried life," an allusion to a poem of the same name by Matthew Arnold:

- This Romantic poem describes the difficulty of understanding one's own inner life (one's hopes, desires, fears), and suggests that such understanding can be attained by being open and vulnerable with another person.
- This allusion thus hints that the speaker's self-knowledge and insight will suffer if he does not open up to the lady.
- At the same time, the many barriers to their free communication (as, even here, the lady speaks in cultural references and metaphors instead of just saying what she means) suggest that it is nearly impossible to find fulfillment in this way, perhaps highlighting the failure of Romantic-era ideals in the modern world.

The lady continues to describe her love for spring by mentioning things commonly associated with romance, such as "sunsets" and "Paris." Spring, like the lilacs at the start of this section, is a symbol of youth; the lady thus links youth with romance. She actually makes this connection explicit when she says that she "find[s] the world / To be wonderful and youthful after all."

All this romantic language seems to annoy the speaker, evidenced by the fact that the lady's voice again conjures discordant music within his mind. Through a simile, he compares her voice itself to a grating tune:

- The mention of a "broken violin" recalls the "attenuated tones of violins / Mingled with remote cornets" from the speaker's previous visit. But while those earlier violins were "winding," tuning up in preparation for a song, they're now "insistent" and "out-of-tune"—details suggesting that the speaker is increasingly fed-up with the lady's sentimental musings.

Also note how the speaker specifies that the violin the lady's voice evokes plays "on an August afternoon" while she describes "April sunsets." The juxtaposition of these two settings reflects the characters' differing views of romance:

- The lady describes youth, romance, and intimacy as beautiful, cherished things that bring her comfort, and she links them all with spring—a time of rebirth and renewal.
- For the speaker, though, such sentimental subjects don't evoke a dreamy sunset in a temperate month. Instead, they bring to mind the hottest and stickiest time of the year—in turn suggesting that he finds such talk stifling or suffocating.

The lady goes on to note that the speaker comforts her by offering empathy and emotional connection. But for the audience, it's clear that the speaker doesn't actually do this—he's made zero attempts to understand or be sympathetic to her!

There are indications that the lady understands the speaker's emotional limitations and is actually being ironic here—perhaps what she really means to convey is that the speaker does *not* reach out to her, and that she would like him to. For instance, when the lady expresses her certainty that the speaker understands her, she continually rephrases herself. She repeats the same words at the beginning of each attempt to engage the speaker, but these statements get briefer and briefer, suggesting that faith is dwindling:

"I am always sure that you understand
My feelings, always sure that you feel,
Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand.

The repetition that appears throughout this passage, including polysyndeton ("And") and diacope (discussed above), draws out the lady's statements so that she comes across as rather unrelenting. Similarly, enjambment creates the impression of long, sprawling sentences that span many lines, reinforcing the idea that she's long winded.

Finally, note how when the lady's "voice returns," the poem's meter breaks from its iambic pattern:

"I am always sure that you understand
My feelings, always sure that you feel,
Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand.

These metrical variations reinforce the suggestion that she's nervous, offended, or otherwise emotional, as she struggles to express her feelings within an acceptable, formal structure. At the same time, the uneven rhythm reflects the speaker's portrayal of her voice as "out-of-tune."

LINES 61-68

You are invulnerable, you have no Achilles' heel.
You will go on, and when you have prevailed
You can say: at this point many a one has failed.
But what have I, but what have I, my friend,
To give you, what can you receive from me?
Only the friendship and the sympathy

Of one about to reach her journey's end.
I shall sit here, serving tea to friends ...."

The lady sarcastically tells the speaker that he's totally impervious to harm and will be successful where others have failed. First, she compares him to a hero of Greek mythology, the demigod Achilles:

- "Achilles' heel" is a common metaphor for a fatal flaw. It comes from the ancient myth in which Achilles's mother dips her son into the mystical River Styx, the waters of which make him immortal. But because his mother holds him by his ankle during this dip, his heel never touches the water and thus remains vulnerable. Years later, during the Trojan war, Achilles gets shot in the heel with an arrow and dies.

The lady's declaration that the speaker has fewer vulnerabilities than Achilles is an example of verbal irony; the lady really means *the* opposite of what she's saying—that is, the speaker is vulnerable. She's suggesting that the speaker does have a weakness or "blind spot"—presumably the youthful pride and ignorance she calls out earlier in this conversation!

The only thing the lady seems genuine about is that the speaker will not heed her advice, and instead "will go on" in his rudderless approach to life. The lady then asks what she can give the speaker on this journey, seemingly with the understanding that the speaker doesn't think she has much to offer.

By now the reader (and probably the speaker himself) is starting to wonder, *What is he getting out of these interactions?* The lady presents this very question so on her own terms here, making it rhetorical; she immediately answers her own question, saying that she can offer him "Only the friendship and the sympathy / Of one about to reach her journey's end."

- Referring to her death as "her journey's end," (a euphemism) makes death sound like the sweet conclusion to an epic adventure. Perhaps she's trying to make the speaker more comfortable with the subject or convince herself that she has accepted death.
- Whatever the case, this metaphor resonates with the speaker's travels later in the poem, perhaps suggesting that his youthful adventures will also reach their "end" and leave him in a position similar to the one the lady is in now.

The lady also refers to the speaker as "my friend"—another example of verbal irony, as the lady will later explain that they are not friends.

- That she calls the speaker her "friend" presents her as fake, unable to say what she really means.
- At the same time, the lady repeats various forms of "friend" throughout this passage (an example of polyptoton), which makes her seem desperate to force a relationship or at least give the illusion of one.
- Still, friendship is all she has for the speaker—and he can take it or leave it.

In the meantime, she "shall sit here, serving tea to friends..." The ellipsis that follows her statement indicates that this is an ongoing activity for her. Indeed, the fact that she says "here" indicates that their interactions are part of a larger routine, with the lady always in the same position. Alliteration gives emphasis to her statement:

> I shall sit here, serving tea to friends...

The recurring sounds reinforce the repetitiveness of her lifestyle. If the speaker does not open up and become her "friend," the poem implies, she will be left only with such empty social rituals.

LINES 69-76

I take my hat: how can I make a cowardly amends
For what she has said to me?
You will see me any morning in the park
Reading the comics and the sporting page.
Particularly I remark.
An English countess goes upon the stage.
A Greek was murdered at a Polish dance,
Another bank defaulter has confessed.

The speaker grabs his hat and gets up to leave, feeling at a loss after the lady points out his youthful pride and the strained nature of their relationship. The speaker's growing uncertainty is reflected in the form of a rhetorical question: "how can I make a cowardly amends / For what she has said to me?" He can't come up with a way to smooth things over, even in a "cowardly" manner.

The speaker then notes that he can be found reading the paper "any morning in the park." As in the previous section of the poem, it seems that the speaker tries to regain composure by reminding himself of the comforting routines he can partake in instead of visiting the lady.

But just like those detailed earlier on, the activities described here are impersonal and public ("in the park"). And there's again a sense of monotony in these lines, as he can be seen performing these actions "any morning." Still, there are many indications that the speaker proposes returning to his routines as an attempt to reassure himself:

- For starters, the poem's stream of consciousness

style suggests that he leaves in *response* to the lady's statements about his ignorance and their strained relationship.
- The short, clipped sentences and end-stopped lines here also suggest the speaker's attempt to project firm authority.

The speaker also attempts to lift himself up by scrutinizing the behavior of others, particularly those of a lower socio-economic class:

- A noblewoman becomes an actress, immigrants are violent towards one another, and the poor fail to repay their loans.
- The juxtaposition of wealth and lower-class occupations in "An English countess goes upon the stage" suggests that the woman's actions are improper, while the juxtaposition of a "Greek" and "Pole" suggests that, in the speaker's mind, *all* immigrants are murderous.

The fact that this is light reading for the speaker suggests that he's presumably unbothered by such problems. Moreover, the many formal *similarities* of the three statements essentially equate them. His descriptions once again follow a repetitive parallel grammatical structure, which makes it seem as though there's no difference between murder and an aristocrat making their stage debut. All the details of modern life, then, seem to blend together in the speaker's mind.

LINES 77-83

I keep my countenance,
I remain self-possessed
Except when a street-piano, mechanical and tired
Reiterates some worn-out common song
With the smell of hyacinths across the garden
Recalling things that other people have desired.
Are these ideas right or wrong?

Although the speaker doesn't quite know how to respond to the lady's statements about his youth and their relationship, he resolves to keep his composure—to remain calm and collected. This is working out just fine for him until he hears a "street-piano" churning out popular music and smells flowers in a nearby garden. These sounds and scents seem to irk the speaker because they remind him of the kinds of things other people like (and remember, this speaker is pretty disdainful of modern popular culture—finding it tedious and shallow).

Music and flowers also recall the speaker's conversations with the lady (when classical music played in the background, and she twirled lilac stems between her fingers). It's like the speaker can't escape the lady—and the feelings that their conversation prompted—even outside her home:

- Both of these things have also become symbolic of romance and intimacy in the poem, with flowers additionally recalling the lady's comments about the fragility and ignorance of his youthful state.
- That the speaker finds this piano song "worn-out" and "mechanical," then, suggests his discomfort with and aversion to romance and intimacy.

Hearing the song, the speaker is left wondering, "Are these ideas right or wrong?" These symbols of his conversation with the lady leave the speaker unsure about what's proper or improper when it comes to love and desire. Thus even as the speaker wants to "keep [his] countenance," it's clear that his interactions with the lady make him feel uncertain and confused.

Finally, note how this long, sprawling stanza, in contrast to those that precede it, reinforces the impression that the speaker is spinning out of control, his thoughts flowing erratically. Enjambment adds to this effect: the flow of lines represents the speaker's stream of thoughts.

LINES 84-92

The October night comes down; returning as before
Except for a slight sensation of being ill at ease
I mount the stairs and turn the handle of the door
And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees.
"And so you are going abroad; and when do you return?
But that's a useless question.
You hardly know when you are coming back,
You will find so much to learn."
My smile falls heavily among the bric-à-brac.

As the poem's third and final section opens, the speaker returns to the lady's home. It's now October, meaning the poem has traversed almost and entire year in the speaker's life:

- The seasons have come to symbolize various phases of life in the poem.
- "October" suggests the later stages of adulthood; the imminent winter months, and therefore death, loom over this visit.
- The symbol also reinforces the lady's old age and closeness to death, while also hinting that the speaker and the lady's relationship will soon come to an end.

The speaker's trip to the lady's home is similar to those that came "before" it, except now the speaker immediately feels anxious. He describes his feelings as similar to being "on [his] hands and knees," an image that suggests the speaker is nervous and submissive—and that the lady has power over him (though, to be sure, she doesn't exactly get through to him or get her way in the end of the poem). The speaker struggles to gain the upper-hand throughout the remainder of their

conversation.

First, the lady notes that the speaker is going abroad. Readers can assume he's just told her this, as her dialogue begins with "And," suggesting a continuation or response. Once again, then, the speaker immediately expresses an intention to leave her home, even coming equipped with an explanation.

The lady begins to express interest in seeing the speaker when he returns, but she interrupts herself, likely because she doesn't want to be too "forward." She thus says that her question was "useless," since he probably doesn't have a return date yet and there will be so much to explore. Her comment that he will "find so much to learn" recalls her earlier implication that he is ignorant.

Apparently disappointed by her lack of concern for his return, the speaker's "smile falls heavily among the bric-a-brac":

- The fact that his smile is "heavy" indicates that it takes the speaker a great deal of effort to seem okay.
- That smile, in turn, lands among various meaningless and valueless items that the lady has collected over time.
- Alliteration and consonance (bric-a-brac) draws additional attention to this image, which recalls the "odds and ends" that the lady says makes up her life in the first section of the poem. Perhaps the speaker is so down because he, too, is worried about being left with only empty material items at the end of his life.

The use of stream of consciousness knits together the lady's statements and the speaker's feelings of insecurity and discomfort—implying that this insecurity and discomfort is a *response* to those statements. In fact, the lady's statements and the speaker's feelings seem to merge within the speaker's mind, thanks to the repetition of the word "and":

> And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees.
> "And so you are going abroad; and when do you return?

The repetition throughout this passage more broadly gives the impression that the speaker is overwhelmed or bombarded by both the lady's remarks and by his own emotions.

LINES 93-101

> *"Perhaps you can write to me."*
> *My self-possession flares up for a second;*
> *This*
> *is as I had reckoned.*
> *"I have been wondering frequently of late*
> *(But our beginnings never know our ends!)*
> *Why we have not developed into friends."*
> *I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark*
> *Suddenly, his expression in a glass.*
> *My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark.*

The lady asks the speaker to write to her while he's away, which briefly strokes the speaker's ego; he'd expected her to want to keep in touch. Yet then the lady notes that the two of them aren't actually friends, and he loses his cool.

The lady's comment that they "have not developed into friends" contradicts her calling the speaker "my friend" earlier in the poem, reinforcing the idea that she doesn't say what she really feels. Also note how she interrupts her own comment with a parenthetical: "(But our beginnings never know our ends!)":

- The juxtaposition between "beginnings" and "ends" here reinforces the disparity between what one *thinks* an outcome will be at the start, and how things turn out in reality. This comment resonates with the lady's earlier statements about youthful ignorance, perhaps suggesting that the speaker's future is uncertain.
- But her statement applies more directly to her relationship with the speaker, and how her high hopes and expectations have gone unfulfilled. The collective pronoun "our" and the rhyme between "ends" and "friends" reinforces the suggestion that she is discussing the failures of their (semi-)attempted romance.

Alliteration places additional emphasis on her statement:

> (But our beginnings never know our ends!)
> Why we have not developed into friends.

The speaker believes that the lady is flattering him by trying to maintain a connection. But in reality, she's lamenting their failure to form a connection in the first place. This disturbs and unsettles the speaker, who likens himself to someone suddenly seeing, and being surprised by, their own reflection in a mirror (which is what the "glass" of line 100 refers to).

Generally speaking, this passage thus reveals that the speaker does, in fact, care about the lady's feelings—or, at least, that his sense of self has come to depend on her affections and criticism. The speaker's volatile emotions throughout this passage show how much sway her statements have over him. For instance, he compares his "self-possession" to a flame that "flares up" when he feels flattered, and which "gutters" (or burns unsteadily) before totally going out when the lady suggests that their relationship might be over (leaving him "in the dark"—totally lost).

The speaker uses parallelism, and more specifically antithesis, to present these emotional reactions:

My self-possession flares up [...]
[...]
My self-possession gutters; [...]

These devices emphasize just how extreme his mood swings are.

LINES 102-108

"For everybody said so, all our friends,
They all were sure our feelings would relate
So closely! I myself can hardly understand.
We must leave it now to fate.
You will write, at any rate.
Perhaps it is not too late.
I shall sit here, serving tea to friends."

The lady is surprised that she and the speaker haven't bonded, given that all of their mutual friends encouraged them to get to know each other and thought that they'd have lots in common. Her statements suggest that there's been some sort of failure on her and the speaker's part to form the connection expected of them. (Or perhaps their "friends" don't really understand their "feelings" at all, which wouldn't be surprising since they're not very open with their emotions.)

The repetition in lines 102-103 emphasizes the lady's surprise at this turn of events. Note how the diacope of "our" draws repeated attention to the speaker and lady as a sort of *unit*, while that of "all" reinforces the fact that many people believed they were well-suited to each other:

For everybody said so, all our friends,
They all were sure our feelings would relate
So closely! [...]

The combination of enjambment and an exclamation here ("relate / So closely!") further emphasizes the lady's emotional distress, as the structure of her statements becomes rather erratic. At the same time, she seems determined not to let it *show* that her failed relationship with the speaker bothers her. Accordingly, she makes three rapid, authoritative statements to suggest that she has accepted the state of their relationship:

We must leave it now to fate.
You will write, at any rate.
Perhaps it is not too late.

These short, declarative, end-stopped lines evoke the lady's resolve to accept that things are over. Yet when the lady says that it might not be "too late" for their relationship, she reveals hope (thus betraying her ongoing emotional investment in the speaker). This brings readers to the lady's final line of dialogue:

I shall sit here, serving tea to friends."

The lady's parting words indicate that when the speaker leaves her, she'll continue to spend her days just as she does now, carrying out her empty routines and social interactions.

This line appeared earlier in the poem (line 68), and its repetition here reinforcing the repetitiveness of the lady's lifestyle. However, while her statement was earlier was punctuated by an ellipsis ("..."), indicating ongoing action, this line closes with a firm, final period. This is how the speaker leaves her—starved for intimacy, with only meaningless material goods and social rituals to comfort her.

LINES 109-113

And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression ... dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.
Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance—

Once again, the speaker is deeply affected by the lady's statements suggesting that she's okay with the sorry state of their relationship. However, the speaker is so unfamiliar with displaying his emotions, that he "must borrow every changing shape / To find expression":

- This metaphor indicates that he must mimic the way others behave in order to find a way of expressing himself.
- This reflects the fact that, throughout the poem, the speaker adheres to strict social conventions and evaluates the propriety of *others'* decisions and desires (as when he asked, "Are these ideas right or wrong?" in line 83).
- Once again, then, there's a tinge of irony in his statements, as the speaker claims to want to express his own emotions yet copies others in order to do so.

The phrase "changing shape," amplified by assonance on that long /ay/ sound, reinforces the speaker's emotional volatility. The speaker then introduces a series of similes to describe the sort of behaviors he might copy—which turn out to be the blathering of animals. He will "dance, dance / Like a dancing bear, / Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape":

- The absurdity of these images reinforces just how unnatural it feels for the speaker to express his emotions; the process who comes across as inelegant and clumsy.
- Additionally, the mention of a "parrot" (a bird that famously repeats phrases that it hears) and an "ape" (a word that's also a synonym for "copy") doubles down the idea of mimicry—the speaker struggles to being authentic.
- The parallelism here—each statement follows the

structure "[dance/cry/chatter] like a [bear/parrot/ape]"—reinforces the idea that the speaker takes an ironically *formulaic* approach to self-expression.

The speaker then proposes going out into the city, repeating a phrase from line 36: "Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance." Much like the speaker's impulse to mimic others, his immediate response to uncomfortable emotions is to enter a public space and perform his same meaningless routines—to surround himself with a cloud of smoke that muffles the world around him.

The form of these lines are unconventional for the speaker, containing irregular meter and enjambment. For instance, here's a look at the stress pattern of lines 110-112:

To find expression ... dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.

Gone is the steady iamb (da-DUM) that defines so much of the poem. The uneven, unpredictable flow of the speaker's thoughts reinforce his emotional distress, making him seem increasingly erratic. Harsh consonance intensifies the bleak and chaotic atmosphere as the poem draws to a close. Note, for example, the sharp /p/ and /t/, as well as the growling /r/, sounds in "Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape."

LINES 114-120

Well! and what if she should die some afternoon,
Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose;
Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand
With the smoke coming down above the housetops;
Doubtful, for quite a while
Not knowing what to feel or if I understand
Or whether wise or foolish, tardy or too soon ...

When the speaker mentioned his desire to "take the air, in a tobacco trance" earlier in the poem (line 83), he followed up the line with a series of mundane routines that seemed to offer respite from his stifling visits with the lady (he wanted to "Admire the monuments, / Discuss the late events," etc.). Here, however, the speaker interrupts himself after this phrase—suggesting that these empty rituals no longer bring him comfort.

The speaker then wonders what will happen if the lady dies. He seems bitter and guilty as he envisions this scenario, in which it's the lady who leaves the speaker. He implicitly blames her for the breakdown of their relationship and his loneliness, even though readers have just seen him break things off with the lady and generally reject her attempts at intimacy. There's thus an undercurrent of irony in the speaker's statement that the lady might "die and leave me" alone:

- The fact that the speaker feels slighted by the idea of the lady dying betrays his self-centered egoism; while he's upset about her death, this comes from his own guilt and confusion rather than from a sense of loss.
- The speaker also seems to resent the lady's request for him to write to her, imagining himself "sitting pen in hand," presumably writing the lady a letter that will never receive a reply.

The speaker also pictures the lady dying on an"afternoon grey and smoky," an image that he juxtaposes with the "evening yellow and rose" that he imagines would follow:

- Smoke thus far in the poem has symbolized the anxieties and drawbacks of modernity. Its appearance here thus suggests that the speaker's failure to form a lasting bond will leave him with only the empty, meaningless lifestyle that the modern world offers for company.
- "Yellow and rose," meanwhile, implies illness and the yellow glow of streetlights. Perhaps the speaker is suggesting that the bleak urban atmosphere will intensify for him when the lady dies, or perhaps he's saying that she'll enter a rosier "evening" phase of her life.
- In any case, the juxtaposition reinforces the fact that her death constitutes a major shift for the speaker.

The speaker goes on to list a number of concerns that he imagines himself mulling over when the lady dies "for quite a while." He remains filled with indecision, bouncing between feeling "wise or foolish,"tardy [that is, late] or too soon." Alliteration places additional force behind the speaker's doubts, emphasizing his exasperation:

Not knowing what to feel or if I understand
Or whether wise or foolish, tardy or too soon ...

With the lady gone, in this scenario, it's clear that the speaker is more adrift than ever, unsure of "what to feel"—a phrase that suggests he's still overly concerned with feeling the so-called "right" thing than simply *feeling*.

LINES 121-124

Would she not have the advantage, after all?
This music is successful with a "dying fall"
Now that we talk of dying—
And should I have the right to smile?

The speaker wonders if the lady's death would actually give her some "advantage" over him, given that it would leave him alone and miserable in the end. By calling her death an "advantage," he makes their relationship sound like a shallow game, once again rejecting any true intimacy.

The speaker then indicates that he still hears music, remarking that "This music is successful." It's unclear if the music plays in the background of their conversations or if it exists within the speaker's own head. In either case, it might be surprising that the speaker calls it "successful," given his unflattering statements about music thus far:

- Music is a symbol of romance and intimacy in the poem, both of which the speaker repeatedly rejects.
- Yet the music here is successful in the way that it *fades away*—it has a "dying fall," or gradual decrease. Perhaps, then, the speaker appreciates that romance gradually fades from his life when the lady dies.

Note that "dying fall" is also an allusion to the opening lines of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, which read:

> If music be the food of love, play on;
> Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
> The appetite may sicken, and so die.
> That strain again! it had a dying fall:

The speaker of these lines, Duke Orsino, is infatuated with the Countess Olivia, but doesn't truly love her. In these lines, Orsino compares music to food, as music "feeds" love:

- Such music/food over-satiates Orsino, however. And, again, the love that he describes turns out to be nothing more than a hollow infatuation.
- This allusion thus reinforces the speaker's distaste for romance and intimacy.

The poem then ends with a final rhetorical question: "Should I have the right to smile?" This recalls the previous section of the poem, where the lady warns that cruel, remorseless "youth [...] smiles at situations it cannot see." In a way, then, the speaker might be asking if he should have the right to be cruel, ignorant, and remorseless towards the woman's passing. This rhetorical question is posed to the reader, who will likely conclude that no, he should not have the right to smile at her death. As such, the audience is left with a view of the speaker as callous and uncaring—viewing her passing as no great upheavall in his life.

SYMBOLS

SMOKE AND FOG

"Portrait of a Lady" begins "[a]mong the smoke and fog of a December afternoon." Smoke and fog are common symbols of industrialization and modernization in Eliot's work, and here might be said to represent the ills of modern life—specifically the way that modern life, in his take, prevents genuine intimacy and communication.

The poem suggests that modernization leaves people feeling alienated and emotionally detached. To that end, the speaker repeatedly hopes to escape the lady's sentimentality by disappearing into a hazy cloud of tobacco smoke. His desire for a "tobacco trance" implies that he's more comfortable with meaningless interactions than with attempts at connection; he'd rather remain alienated than make himself emotionally vulnerable.

However, as the poem closes, the speaker envisions the lady dying and leaving him alone on an "afternoon grey and smoky"—with only his empty routines and shallow friendships to comfort him. The smoke here reinforces the all-pervasive environment of loneliness and alienation—anxieties that "pollute" the modern world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the smoke and fog of a December afternoon"
- **Line 36:** "tobacco trance"
- **Line 113:** "tobacco trance"
- **Line 115:** "grey and smoky"
- **Line 117:** "smoke"

THE SEASONS, SPRING, AND FLOWERS

As each section of the poem opens, the speaker announces the time of year during which he visits the lady, allowing the audience to track the progression of their relationship. Because they mark time's passage, the seasons might be interpreted as symbols for the phases of life: spring represents youth, while winter signifies old age and death. It's no coincidence, then, that the speaker visits the lady for the last time in October—shortly before winter's arrival. This final meeting marks the end of their relationship, as the speaker plans on traveling and implies that the lady will die soon.

Spring, by contrast, is a time of freshness in the poem, and the floral imagery throughout reinforces this symbolism. In the second section, for example, the lady twists fresh lilac stems while explaining the dangers of youthful ignorance, demonstrating the fragility of "new life" (represented here by those newly bloomed flowers).

In the same conversation, the lady explains that "April sunsets" and "Paris in the Spring" fill her with comfort and hope, stirring up her "buried life" (that is, her youth, her former dreams and desires). Spring and its flowers thus also represent the sort of openness that unsettles the speaker, who is bristles at such sentimentality. The speaker even finds himself losing his composure when he smells "hyacinths across the garden"—a fact that emphasizes his extreme aversion to intimacy or emotional vulnerability.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon"
- **Lines 41-43:** "Now that lilacs are in bloom / She has a bowl of lilacs in her room / And twists one in her fingers while she talks."
- **Line 46:** "(Slowly twisting the lilac stalks)"
- **Lines 52-53:** ""Yet with these April sunsets, that somehow recall / My buried life, and Paris in the Spring,"
- **Line 81:** "With the smell of hyacinths across the garden"
- **Line 84:** "The October night comes down;"

MUSIC

Music appears in several forms throughout the poem, usually during the speaker's conversations with the lady: it's either playing in the background, used to describe the lady's voice, or comes across a figment of the speaker's imagination. All this music can be taken as a symbol of their social interactions, or perhaps of intimacy more generally.

At first, the speaker describes expressive classical music playing in the background of his conversations with the lady. His references to the Romantic-era virtuoso Chopin and a pianist whose tune flows "through his hair and finger-tips" play up the sentimental, intimate connotations of music.

However, as the speaker's conversations with the lady go on—the lady revealing more personal information and discussing romantic subjects such as youth and relationships—the speaker starts to hear a "dull" and "out-of-tune" song pounding in his head. This mixes with the sound of "cracked coronets" (essentially, broken trumpets), suggesting a painful cacophony in the speaker's mind. He even compares the lady's voice to the sound of an "insistent out-of-tune / [...] broken violin" The speaker also feels tormented by the popular music played by a street-piano. The speaker's aversion to all this music reflects his aversion to romance and intimacy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole / Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips"
- **Lines 12-13:** "the bloom / That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room."
- **Lines 16-17:** "attenuated tones of violins / Mingled with remote cornets"
- **Line 21:** "composed"
- **Lines 29-31:** "the winding of the violins / And the ariettes / Of cracked cornets"
- **Lines 32-35:** "a dull tom-tom begins / Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own, / Capricious monotone / That is at least one definite "false note.""
- **Lines 56-57:** "the insistent out-of-tune / Of a broken violin"
- **Lines 79-80:** "a street-piano, mechanical and tired / Reiterates some worn-out common song"
- **Line 122:** "This music is successful with a "dying fall""

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

On the most basic level, alliteration adds sonic interest and music to the poem (we've highlighted some specific examples of alliteration here). It often mirrors the literal music that the speaker hears, in fact, and in doing so makes the poem all the more immediate and vivid for readers. Take, for example, the "cracked cornets" from line 31, the sharp alliteration of which reinforces the idea that a song "hammers" in the speaker's head.

As with other forms of repetition, the reappearance of many similar sounds also makes the speaker and the lady's interactions seem all the more predictable. Hearing the same sounds over and over again evokes the repetitive nature of their lives. In fact, alliteration actually appears within the two lines that the poem repeats directly, which describe each character's typical routines:

> Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance
> I shall sit here, serving tea to friends

Alliteration also just makes phrases like this more memorable, making them linger in the reader's mind. Consonance enhances the effect; note how sharp /k/ sounds echo in "take"/"tobacco," and how the /s/ sound of "trance" continues into the next line with "sit"/"serving."

Finally, alliteration can place additional emphasis on certain words and phrases. Take the lady's dialogue in line 19:

> "You do not know, you do not know / How much they mean to me, my friends,

The clear alliteration here evokes the lady's sheer insistence on her point (that is, that friendship is deeply important to her).

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Pole"
- **Line 9:** "Preludes"
- **Line 13:** "questioned," "concert"
- **Line 14:** "conversation"
- **Line 15:** "carefully," "caught"
- **Line 16:** "attenuated tones"

- **Line 17:** “cornets”
- **Line 19:** “not,” “know,” “much,” “mean,” “me,” “my”
- **Line 24:** “find,” “friend”
- **Line 27:** “much,” “means”
- **Line 31:** “cracked,” “cornets”
- **Line 33:** “prelude”
- **Line 34:** “Capricious”
- **Line 36:** “take,” “tobacco,” “trance”
- **Line 44:** “not,” “know,” “not,” “know”
- **Line 45:** “who,” “hold,” “hands”
- **Line 47:** “flow,” “from,” “flow”
- **Line 54:** “world”
- **Line 55:** “wonderful”
- **Line 68:** “shall,” “sit,” “serving,” “tea,” “to,” “friends”
- **Line 69:** “hat,” “how”
- **Line 80:** “common,” “song”
- **Line 81:** “across”
- **Line 82:** “Recalling”
- **Line 83:** “right,” “wrong”
- **Line 85:** “slight sensation”
- **Line 92:** “bric,” “brac”
- **Line 97:** “But,” “beginnings,” “never,” “know”
- **Line 98:** “Why we”
- **Line 102:** “said so”
- **Line 108:** “sit,” “serving,” “tea,” “to”
- **Line 113:** “take,” “tobacco,” “trance”
- **Line 114:** “Well,” “what,” “she,” “should”
- **Line 117:** “down”
- **Line 118:** “Doubtful”
- **Line 119:** “Not,” “knowing”
- **Line 120:** “whether,” “wise,” “tardy,” “too”
- **Line 121:** “advantage,” “after”

ALLUSION

This poem contains many allusions to famous musicians, plays, poems, Greek mythology, and more. On one level, the fact that both the lady and the speaker reference so many high-brow works of art/artists suggests that both care about seeming cultured and sophisticated. The poem's frequent allusions might also reflect the sort of coded language that these characters use, as neither says exactly what they mean but instead hides behind all these fancy references.

Even the poem's title contains an allusion—to Henry James's novel *The Portrait of a Lady*. That said, the protagonist of James's novel shares much more in common with the speaker of this poem than "the lady" it claims to describe:

- Both reject romantic advances in hopes of maintaining their freedoms, but ultimately end up deprived of emotional connection.
- And yet, while the lady of James's novel defies social expectations by making her own way in the world as an independent woman, the speaker of this poem bows to social pressures. In that sense, the lady that this poem describes also has something in common with James's heroine, in that she shows a greater ability to resist conventions when she tries to forge a connection with the speaker.

The poem also alludes to three Elizabethan-era plays: Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (which Eliot quotes in the poem's epigraph), and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (line 6) and *Twelfth Night* (line 122). Because each of these references likens the speaker and the lady to characters in a play, they suggest that the speaker and the lady each play prescribed "roles," and thus are never able to be their true selves with one another. The specifics of these plays are also important:

- The epigraph likens the speaker to Barabas, the murderous and callous protagonist of *The Jew of Malta*, and in doing so suggests that the poem's speaker is responsible for the lady's tragic fate.
- The speaker suggests that he and the lady have a doomed romance when he alludes to *Romeo and Juliet* (a reference that also underscores the dangers of failed communication, given that this is, in a sense, what leads to the title characters' death in that play).
- Finally, the reference to *Twelfth Night* compares the music the speaker hears to that heard by Duke Orsino—music that, in the play, just feeds his empty infatuations.
- Such allusions also contribute to the poem's thematic impact by reinforcing motifs such as death, guilt, and unrequited love.

The lady makes her own allusions as well, referencing the Greek hero Achilles in line 61, for example. She's sarcastically comparing the speaker to Achilles, a near-invincible mythical warrior whose only point of vulnerability was his heel. She also makes two references to Romantic-era art:

- First, she praises the expressive, delicate music of "Chopin."
- Later, she says how wonderful it is to remember her interior world or "buried life," referencing a poem by Matthew Arnold.
- These allusions can be seen as part of the lady's failed attempts to create a romantic atmosphere that might encourage the speaker to open up emotionally. Yet, as with all her attempts at sentimentality, she just drives the speaker away.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** “ Thou hast committed — / Fornication: but that was in another country, / And besides, the wench is dead. / (The Jew of Malta)”
- **Lines 6-7:** “An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb / Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid.”
- **Lines 10-11:** ““So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul / Should be resurrected only among friends”
- **Lines 52-53:** ““Yet with these April sunsets, that somehow recall / My buried life, and Paris in the Spring,”
- **Line 61:** “You are invulnerable, you have no Achilles' heel.”
- **Line 122:** “This music is successful with a "dying fall"”

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is one of many forms of repetition that pops up throughout the poem. The poem's speaker finds his meetings with the lady, and the routines of modern life in general, to be dull and monotonous, so all this repetition makes sense!

Anaphora specifically lends much of the poem's dialogue an air of insistence, as characters repeat the same words/grammatical structures over and over again. By placing emphasis on specific words and phrases, anaphora also reveals what the speaker and the lady are passionate about and/or fixated on at certain moments in the poem.

The lady, for example, often begins clauses—especially those that poke at the speaker's insecurities—with "you." This, in turn, makes the speaker feel targeted and overwhelmed by her comments:

> "Ah, my friend, **you** do not know, **you** do not know
> What life is, **you** who hold it in your hands";
> [...]
> "**You** let it flow from you, **you** let it flow,
> [...]
> **You** are invulnerable, **you** have no Achilles' heel.
> **You** will go on [...]

Notice how this anaphora overlaps with other repetitive devices (namely epizeuxis and parallelism) to make this dialogue all the more intense and emphatic.

The repetition of "and" at the start of clauses (which often overlaps with the poetic device known as polysyndeton) similarly evokes the speaker's sensation of being overwhelmed/bombarded by a stream of attacks. Take lines 48-49, where the lady uses anaphora and polysyndeton as she criticizes the speaker's youthful pride and ignorance:

> **And** youth is cruel, **and** has no remorse
> **And** smiles at situations which it cannot see."

The speaker, meanwhile, turns to anaphora to show his determination to "be okay" in the face of the lady's comments, such as when he remarks, in lines 77-78:

> I keep my countenance,
> I remain self-possessed

Focusing on the word "I" here reflects what the speaker is trying to do: "remain self-possessed," in control of himself.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 22:** “you,” “you”
- **Line 44:** “you,” “you”
- **Line 45:** “you”
- **Line 47:** “You,” “you”
- **Line 48:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 49:** “And”
- **Line 61:** “You,” “you”
- **Line 62:** “You”
- **Line 77:** “I”
- **Line 78:** “I”
- **Line 87:** “And”
- **Line 88:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 90:** “You”
- **Line 91:** “You”

ASSONANCE

Assonance works much like alliteration in the poem. In particular, the repetition of many similar sounds in close succession emphasizes the predictable and repetitive nature of the speaker and the lady's interactions. Assonance also is essential to the poem's meandering rhyme scheme (discussed in the Rhyme Scheme section of this guide); we've highlighted some examples of assonance here.

Readers can get a sense of how assonance works from the poem's opening lines, which repeat the /oo/ sound (both within lines and as end rhymes):

> Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon
> You have the scene arrange itself — as it will seem to do—
> With "I have saved this afternoon for you";
> And four wax candles in the darkened room,
> [...]
> An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb

Each time that /oo/ sound pops up, it's like a reminder that the speaker has been here, done all this, before; the repetitive sound evokes the repetitive nature of these visits.

Assonance can also suggest or reinforce a connection between words that contain similar sounds, such as “you,” “youth,” and “cruel"—whose sonic link hints that the speaker is callous without the lady having to say this outright.

Finally, assonance often simply makes the poem sound good, as in "among the winding of the violins." Such repeating sounds mirroring the music described to reinforce auditory imagery and create a more vivid reading experience.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "afternoon"
- **Line 2:** "You," "to do"
- **Line 3:** "afternoon," "you"
- **Line 4:** "room"
- **Line 6:** "tomb"
- **Line 9:** "Transmit," "Preludes, through," "finger-tips"
- **Line 10:** "intimate, this"
- **Line 14:** "slips"
- **Line 15:** "velleities"
- **Lines 16-17:** "violins / Mingled with"
- **Line 18:** "begins"
- **Line 19:** "You do," "mean," "me"
- **Line 20:** "find"
- **Line 21:** "life"
- **Line 22:** "I," "blind"
- **Line 29:** "winding," "violins"
- **Line 30:** "ariettes"
- **Line 31:** "cracked," "cornets"
- **Line 33:** "own"
- **Line 34:** "monotone"
- **Line 35:** "note"
- **Line 39:** "watches," "clocks"
- **Line 40:** "bocks"
- **Line 48:** "youth," "cruel"
- **Line 49:** "see"
- **Line 51:** "tea"
- **Line 56:** "tune"
- **Line 57:** "afternoon"
- **Line 65:** "receive," "me"
- **Line 66:** "sympathy"
- **Line 67:** "reach," "journey's"
- **Line 68:** "here," "tea"
- **Line 76:** "confessed"
- **Line 77:** "countenance"
- **Line 78:** "self-possessed"
- **Line 80:** "common song"
- **Line 94:** "self-possession," "second"
- **Line 95:** "reckoned"
- **Line 97:** "never," "ends"
- **Line 98:** "developed," "friends"
- **Line 103:** "relate"
- **Line 105:** "fate"
- **Line 106:** "rate"
- **Line 107:** "late"
- **Line 109:** "changing shape"
- **Line 112:** "ape"
- **Line 113:** "air"
- **Line 124:** "I," "right," "smile"

CONSONANCE

Consonance works just like alliteration and assonance: it adds music and sonic interest to the poem, makes lines more forceful and memorable, evokes the poem's imagery for readers, and draws connections between words. We've highlighted some examples of consonance in this guide, but there are many more in the poem!

Notice how even the first stanza is filled with densely-packed sounds. Take lines 14-18, with their mixture of liquid /l/, whispery /s/, muffled /n/, buzzing /v/, and sharp /t/ and /k/ sounds. The sounds of the lines suggest that the speaker is talking smoothly yet crisply, perhaps even through gritted teeth:

> —And so the conversation slips
> Among velleities and carefully caught regrets
> Through attenuated tones of violins
> Mingled with remote cornets
> And begins.

The repetition of similar sounds over and over again might also reinforce the repetitiveness of the speaker and the lady's statements. For instance, here is a look at /n/ and /t/ sounds in lines 56-57:

> The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune
> Of a broken violin on an August afternoon:

Consonance plays up the droning quality of both the lady's voice and the violin to which it is compared.

Most broadly, consonance helps control the poem's mood and reflect the characters' feelings. For instance, lines 41-42 contain more gentle, muted /l/ sounds as the speaker describes a bowl of flowers:

> Now that lilacs are in bloom
> She has a bowl of lilacs in her room

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "smoke," "December"
- **Line 2:** "scene," "itself," "seem"
- **Line 8:** "let us say, to"
- **Lines 8-9:** "latest Pole / Transmit"
- **Line 9:** "Preludes," "finger-tips"
- **Line 10:** "So intimate, this Chopin, that," "soul"
- **Line 14:** "And ," "so," "conversation slips"
- **Line 15:** "velleities," " and carefully caught regrets"

- **Line 16:** " attenuated tones"
- **Lines 16-17:** "violins / Mingled"
- **Lines 17-18:** "remote cornets / And begins"
- **Line 19:** "not know," "much," "mean," "me, my"
- **Line 56:** "returns," "insistent out," "tune"
- **Line 57:** "broken violin on an August afternoon"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem is written in a steam of consciousness style, so it makes sense that it's filled with enjambment. The speaker's thoughts often flow right across line breaks without pause, pulling readers forward. Enjambment keeps the poem from becoming too rigid regular; it helps build momentum, keep things conversational, and create moments of surprise.

Take the first stanza, for example, which is heavily enjambed as the speaker delves into his conversation with the lady. As the words rush down the page, readers get the sense that the lady is talking just to talk—that she's blathering on rather than saying anything of substance.

On a visual level, enjambment also subtly emphasizes important words in the poem by making them linger at the end of a line, as in lines 10-12:

> "So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul
> Should be resurrected only among friends
> Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom

Here, the lines break on sentimental words to play up the associations between music and romance at the beginning of the poem.

Enjambment can also build anticipation, as in lines 44-45:

> "Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know
> What life is, you who hold it in your hands";

The lady says this while ominously twisting lilac stems, creating a sense of heightened anticipation as the audience waits to learn what the speaker "[does] not know." Enjambment thus reflects escalating tension throughout this interaction, illustrating the speaker's discomfort.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "tomb / Prepared"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Pole / Transmit"
- **Lines 10-11:** "soul / Should"
- **Lines 11-12:** "friends / Some"
- **Lines 12-13:** "bloom / That"
- **Lines 14-15:** "slips / Among"
- **Lines 15-16:** "regrets / Through"
- **Lines 16-17:** "violins / Mingled"
- **Lines 17-18:** "cornets / And"
- **Lines 20-21:** "find / In"
- **Lines 25-26:** "gives / Those"
- **Lines 29-30:** "violins / And"
- **Lines 30-31:** "ariettes / Of"
- **Lines 31-32:** "cornets / Inside"
- **Lines 32-33:** "begins / Absurdly"
- **Lines 34-35:** "monotone / That"
- **Lines 44-45:** "know / What"
- **Lines 48-49:** "remorse / And"
- **Lines 52-53:** "recall / My"
- **Lines 54-55:** "world / To"
- **Lines 56-57:** "out-of-tune / Of"
- **Lines 58-59:** "understand / My"
- **Lines 62-63:** "prevailed / You"
- **Lines 66-67:** "sympathy / Of"
- **Lines 69-70:** "amends / For"
- **Lines 71-72:** "park / Reading"
- **Lines 78-79:** "self-possessed / Except"
- **Lines 79-80:** "tired / Reiterates"
- **Lines 80-81:** "song / With"
- **Lines 81-82:** "garden / Recalling"
- **Lines 84-85:** "before / Except"
- **Lines 86-87:** "door / And"
- **Lines 96-97:** "late / (But"
- **Lines 99-100:** "remark / Suddenly"
- **Lines 103-104:** "relate / So"
- **Lines 109-110:** "shape / To"
- **Lines 110-111:** "dance / Like"
- **Lines 116-117:** "hand / With"
- **Lines 118-119:** "while / Not"
- **Lines 119-120:** "understand / Or"

IMAGERY

Imagery makes the poem more vivid and engaging by appealing to readers' senses. For instance, as the poem opens, the speaker establishes a clear setting for all the events that follow in this section. It's a cold, foggy day outside; inside, the lady's home features:

> [...] four wax candles in the darkened room,
> Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,

This imagery helps set the poem's mood, which is dull and dreary. This dark, gloomy, discomforting atmosphere, in turn, reflects the fact that the speaker doesn't enjoy these meetings.

The poem relies on auditory imagery as well, frequently evoking the grating music that serves as a backdrop to these meetings. There's the "attenuated tones of violins / Mingled with remote cornets," for instance, and, less pleasantly, the "dull tom-tom" that's "absurdly hammering a prelude of its own" in the speaker's head.

Imagery is also an essential part of the poem's vivid symbolism. Take lines 43-43:

> She has a bowl of lilacs in her room
> And twists one in her fingers while she talks.

The flower stem represents youth and new life. The image of the lady twisting this stem thus evokes youth's fragility. Not coincidentally, she's lecturing the speaker on the pitfalls and dangers of youthful ignorance here. The imagery here thus reinforces the lady's call to be more thoughtful and careful (as well the sarcasm in her earlier statement that the speaker has no vulnerability or "Achilles' heel").

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the smoke and fog of a December afternoon"
- **Lines 4-5:** "four wax candles in the darkened room, / Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead"
- **Lines 12-13:** "the bloom / That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room"
- **Lines 16-17:** "attenuated tones of violins / Mingled with remote cornets"
- **Lines 29-35:** "Among the winding of the violins / And the ariettes / Of cracked cornets / Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins / Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own, / Capricious monotone / That is at least one definite "false note.""
- **Lines 42-43:** "She has a bowl of lilacs in her room / And twists one in her fingers while she talks"
- **Line 46:** "Slowly twisting the lilac stalks"
- **Lines 56-57:** "The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune / Of a broken violin on an August afternoon"
- **Lines 79-80:** "a street-piano, mechanical and tired / Reiterates some worn-out common song"
- **Line 81:** "the smell of hyacinths across the garden"
- **Lines 85-87:** "a slight sensation of being ill at ease / I mount the stairs and turn the handle of the door / And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees."
- **Lines 110-112:** "dance, dance / Like a dancing bear, / Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape"
- **Line 115:** "Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose;"
- **Lines 116-117:** "me sitting pen in hand / With the smoke coming down above the housetops"

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker and the lady are juxtaposed throughout the poem and might even be seen as character foils. The speaker comes across as more youthful, ignorant, callous, and directionless, while the lady seems exceedingly sappy, sentimental, and needy. The sharp contrast between these characters leads to their failure to communicate.

The speaker attempts to create more distance between himself and the lady, while the lady wishes for greater intimacy. For instance, she speaks of her "buried life" and "the world to be wonderful and youthful," while he seems strictly concerned with empty formal matters; repelled by her statements, the speaker takes his hat and goes out into the city at the end of part II. Furthermore, the speaker shows signs of youthful ignorance, while she projects age and wisdom of experience.

At the same time, these characters share a sense of classicism and elitism, as they each juxtapose the proper behavior of upper-class people against the inappropriate behavior of "the masses":

- According to the lady, for example, Chopin must be played "only among friends / some two or three, who will not touch the bloom / that is rubbed and questioned in the concert room."
- The speaker, meanwhile, juxtaposes a noblewoman with a working-class profession (acting) when he notes that "An English countess goes upon the stage," suggesting that her actions are scandalous.

Finally, juxtaposition often evokes the speaker's ambivalence by presenting two entirely opposite ideas that he can't choose between. For instance, he wonders if he is "wise or foolish, tardy or too soon." This juxtaposition reveals both his uncertainty and his obsession with fitting everything into a neat box of "right" or "wrong," leaving no room for a middle ground.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "said, or left unsaid"
- **Lines 10-13:** ""So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul / Should be resurrected only among friends / Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom / That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room.""
- **Lines 29-35:** "Among the winding of the violins / And the ariettes / Of cracked cornets / Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins / Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own, / Capricious monotone / That is at least one definite "false note.""
- **Lines 48-49:** "And youth is cruel, and has no remorse / And smiles at situations which it cannot see.""
- **Lines 52-55:** ""Yet with these April sunsets, that somehow recall / My buried life, and Paris in the Spring, / I feel immeasurably at peace, and find the world / To be wonderful and youthful, after all.""
- **Lines 56-57:** "The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune / Of a broken violin on an August afternoon:"
- **Line 74:** "An English countess goes upon the stage"
- **Line 75:** "A Greek was murdered at a Polish dance"
- **Line 83:** "right or wrong"
- **Line 94:** "My self-possession flares up for a second;"
- **Line 97:** "(But our beginnings never know our ends!)"

- **Line 101:** "My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark."
- **Lines 102-104:** ""For everybody said so, all our friends, / They all were sure our feelings would relate / So closely! I myself can hardly understand."
- **Line 115:** "Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose;"
- **Line 120:** "wise or foolish, tardy or too soon ..."

IRONY

Irony arises from the tension between the way a situation *seems* and the *reality* of that situation.

Perhaps the most prominent and important irony of all in the poem is that the speaker believes he is presenting a "Portrait of a Lady" but ends up presenting a portrait of himself! To put it differently, the speaker portrays the woman as grating on his nerves and overly sentimental, but he ends up coming across as fussy, self-centered, and unsympathetic—especially as her sentimentality is constantly contrasted with his own callousness and agitation.

This dramatic irony begins with opening epigraph, in which a character named Barabas attempts to make a woman he slept with look bad by calling her a "wench" and saying that she's "dead" anyways:

- Like the speaker of this poem, Barabas's character has come under attack, and to defend himself, he tries to shift the blame onto the woman he slept with.
- But his ungracious words about the woman reflect poorly on Barabas himself in the mind of the audience; his attempts to make himself look good just make him seem cruel and unfeeling.
- Similarly, as the speaker of this poem tries to insult the lady, he makes himself seem cold and hypocritical.

There's also irony to be found in the speaker's lack of self-awareness beyond his interactions with the lady:

- For instance, he characterizes his meetings with the lady as mundane, stifling, shallow affairs, which he wants to escape by getting some fresh air.
- And yet, he ends up entering a "tobacco trance" and performing similarly empty, arbitrary routines outside the lady's home—shallowly taking in "the monuments," talking about "late events," and drinking.

The overarching juxtaposition between the speaker's perception of events and that of the lady produces yet more irony. In particular, the lady believes that she's created a romantic setting that will bring her closer to the speaker, but it actually drives him away. In lines 4-6, for instance, the speaker sees her candlelit home not as romantic and inviting, but as dreary and tomb-like:

> And four wax candles in the darkened room,
> Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,
> An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb

The fact that neither character in this poem says how they really feel also gives rise to a great deal of verbal irony, as the lady often says the opposite of what she really means:

- She sarcastically claims in lines 61-63 that the speaker is totally "invulnerable," for instance. She compares him to the Greek hero Achilles not to flatter him, however, but to put him in his place—to argue that he is, in fact, quite vulnerable to the pitfalls and dangers of his youth.
- She also refers to the speaker as "my friend" throughout the poem before revealing that they actually "have not developed into friends"—a blatant contradiction!

Similarly, the lady feigns surprise when the speaker indicates that he could tell she doesn't love her life, and she pretends that this observation makes him very smart and perceptive:

> (For indeed I do not love it ... you knew? you are not blind!
> How keen you are!)

She's trying to take the speaker down a peg, so to speak, by seeming to flatter him while really mocking him for not paying close attention to her feelings—for not being "keen" at all. The humorous falsehood of her statements reinforces the absurd limitations of their conversations; social propriety stops them from saying what they really mean outright.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** " Thou hast committed — /
  Fornication: but that was in another country, / And besides, the wench is dead."
- **Lines 4-6:** "And four wax candles in the darkened room, / Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead, / An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb"
- **Lines 22-23:** "you knew? you are not blind! / How keen you are!"
- **Lines 36-40:** "— Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance, / Admire the monuments, / Discuss the late events, / Correct our watches by the public clocks. / Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks."
- **Line 44:** "my friend"

- **Lines 48-51:** "youth is cruel, and has no remorse / And smiles at situations which it cannot see." / I smile, of course, / And go on drinking tea"
- **Line 54:** "I feel immeasurably at peace"
- **Lines 58-60:** "I am always sure that you understand / My feelings, always sure that you feel, / Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand"
- **Lines 61-63:** "You are invulnerable, you have no Achilles' heel. / You will go on, and when you have prevailed / You can say: at this point many a one has failed."
- **Line 64:** "my friend"
- **Lines 77-78:** "I keep my countenance, / I remain self-possessed"
- **Lines 94-95:** "My self-possession flares up for a second; / This / is as I had reckoned."
- **Lines 99-101:** "I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark / Suddenly, his expression in a glass. / My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark."
- **Line 113:** "Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance"
- **Line 116:** "Should die and leave me"

METAPHOR

Like imagery, metaphors are vital to the poem because they make a strong impression on the reader, reinforcing key themes and ideas. The many metaphors here make the speaker and the lady's experiences all the more vivid and relatable:

- For instance, the lady laments that her life is "composed so much, so much of odds and ends." In other words, her life is made up of miscellaneous items and scraps—a metaphorical description that helps the audience grasp just how tired, empty, impersonal, and unfulfilling her life must be.
- In another metaphor the speaker describes a song "hammering" in his head in order to illustrate his growing boredom, irritation, and frustration with their conversation.
- Both this metaphor and the lady's noted above grant readers more tangible insight into characters' emotions.

The poem being so filled metaphorical language might also reflect the fact that the speaker and the lady don't say what they really mean, as doing so would be considered improper (for the lady to be forward and for the speaker to openly reject her). Instead of speaking clearly and directly, then, they resort to metaphors:

- Note, for instance, how the lady refers to dying as "her journey's end," a euphemism that reflects her desire to sugarcoat things so that she doesn't make her guest uncomfortable.
- And in addition to portraying both characters as evasive and indirect, the poem's many flowery metaphors suggest that they are self-important or overly concerned with coming across as cultured and intellectual.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "You have the scene arrange itself"
- **Line 6:** "An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb"
- **Lines 12-13:** "the bloom / That is rubbed and questioned"
- **Line 21:** "a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends"
- **Lines 28-28:** "life, what / cauchemar"
- **Lines 32-35:** "Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins / Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own, / Capricious monotone / That is at least one definite "false note.""
- **Line 45:** "you who hold it in your hands"
- **Line 47:** "You let it flow from you, you let it flow"
- **Line 49:** "smiles at situations which it cannot see."
- **Line 60:** "across the gulf you reach your hand"
- **Line 61:** "you have no Achilles' heel"
- **Line 67:** "her journey's end"
- **Line 92:** "My smile falls heavily among the bric-à-brac"
- **Line 101:** "My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark."
- **Lines 109-110:** "I must borrow every changing shape / To find expression"

REPETITION

The poem is overflowing with repetition, the many forms of which reinforce the monotony and meaninglessness of the upper-class lifestyle that these characters lead. The poem turns to the same words, phrases, and grammatical structures again and again, reflecting the fact that the speaker and the lady are trapped within a shallow, boring routine.

In fact, the poem's actually repeats two phrases that describe each character's routine: the lady serves tea to friends at home ("I shall sit here…"), while the speaker goes out into public spaces and smokes tobacco ("Let us take the air…"):

- At first, these routines seem to help both characters cope with feelings of loneliness, boredom, etc. For example, the lady talks about how much friendship means to her before declaring that, through the end of her days, she'll stay in the same spot serving her friends tea. Here, then, this action seems comforting.
- However, the second time this phrase appears, it takes on a bleaker tone. The lady has just said that she and the speaker *haven't* formed a friendship, so when she repeats the phrase "I shall sit here, serving tea to friends," it seems bitter and sad.

- The speaker, for his part, is upset by this revelation, proposing for the second time in the poem to "take the air, in a tobacco trance." But this time around, this idea gets immediately interrupted with the worry that the woman will die and leave him alone.
- Thus, as the poem goes on, the repetition of these two phrases reveals the failure of these dull routines to—serving tea and smoking outside—help the characters overcome their isolation and lack of fulfillment.

Similarly, parallelism appears in a few places when the speaker is describing his behavior, suggesting that he follows a rigid and repetitive set of rules that govern his actions:

- For example, when the speaker is offended/shaken by the lady's comments about youthful ignorance, he declares, "I keep my countenance, / I remain self-possessed."
- The anaphora and parallelism within these statements indicate that the speaker is resolute and firm, but it also suggests that he feels confined or restricted, like he must force himself into this appearance of composure.

Furthermore, the fact that both figures recycle so many words, phrases, sentence structures, etc., suggests that they have a severely restricted "proper" vocabulary to chose from. As a result, they circle back to the same subjects and phrasing over and over again. Of course, repetition is a natural part of speech, so it helps the poem maintain a realistic, conversational feel. But when repetition becomes almost humorously excessive, it suggests a limited vocabulary.

- For instance, the speaker describes the room in which he visits with the lady as "Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid" and then, "We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole…"
- The repetition of various forms of "say" (an example of polyptoton) shows the emptiness of their conversations, as they don't really "say" anything at all!

The lady in particular tends to repeat herself often as she searches for the appropriate phrasing to express her emotions, as in:

> "You let it flow from you, you let it flow,
> And youth is cruel, and has no remorse
> And smiles at situations which it cannot see."

This makes her come across as hesitant and uncertain. She's always circling around the point but never really getting a clear message across. Such repetition also draws out her statements, make the conversation feel relentless and overwhelming to the speaker.

However, the speaker's own language (in his internal monologue) actually starts to repeat itself more and more over time, suggesting that he's becoming emotionally unraveled and unsure of himself. In fact, the speaker repeats himself often while describing his feeling of apprehension during his final visit to the lady's house, as in lines 87-87:

> I mount the stairs and turn the handle of the door
> And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees.

In this way, repetition also subtly illustrates the emotional distress of its characters.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "afternoon"
- **Line 3:** "afternoon"
- **Line 4:** "four"
- **Line 5:** "Four"
- **Line 7:** "said," "unsaid"
- **Line 8:** "say"
- **Line 13:** "and"
- **Line 14:** "And"
- **Line 15:** "and"
- **Line 16:** "violins"
- **Line 17:** "cornets"
- **Line 18:** "And"
- **Line 19:** "how much they mean," "friends"
- **Line 20:** "And," "how," "how"
- **Line 21:** "so much," "so much," "and"
- **Line 22:** "you," "you"
- **Line 23:** "you"
- **Line 24:** "friend," "who has," "qualities"
- **Line 25:** "Who has," "and"
- **Line 26:** "qualities," "friendship"
- **Line 27:** "How much it means"
- **Line 28:** "friendships"
- **Line 29:** "violins"
- **Line 31:** "cornets"
- **Line 36:** "Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance"
- **Lines 37-40:** "Admire the monuments, / Discuss the late events, / Correct our watches by the public clocks. / Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks."
- **Line 41:** "lilacs"
- **Line 42:** "lilacs"
- **Line 43:** "twists"
- **Line 44:** "my friend," "you do not know," "you do not know"
- **Line 45:** "you"
- **Line 46:** "twisting," "lilac"
- **Line 47:** "You let it flow," "you," "you let it flow"

- **Line 48:** "And," "and"
- **Line 49:** "And," "smiles"
- **Line 50:** "smile"
- **Line 51:** "And"
- **Line 53:** "and"
- **Line 54:** "and"
- **Line 55:** "and"
- **Line 57:** "violin"
- **Line 58:** "always sure," "you"
- **Line 59:** "feelings," "always sure," "you," "feel"
- **Line 60:** "Sure," "you," "your"
- **Line 61:** "You," "you"
- **Line 62:** "You," "you"
- **Line 63:** "You"
- **Line 64:** "But what have I," "but what have I," "my friend"
- **Line 65:** "you," "you"
- **Line 66:** "friendship"
- **Line 68:** "I shall sit here, serving tea to friends ...."
- **Lines 74-76:** "An English countess goes upon the stage. / A Greek was murdered at a Polish dance, / Another bank defaulter has confessed."
- **Lines 77-78:** "I keep my countenance, / I remain self-possessed"
- **Line 86:** "mount," "and"
- **Line 87:** "And," "mounted," "and"
- **Line 88:** "And," "you," "and," "you"
- **Line 90:** "You," "you"
- **Line 91:** "You"
- **Line 93:** "you"
- **Line 94:** "My self-possession flares up"
- **Line 97:** "our," "our"
- **Line 98:** "friends"
- **Line 101:** "My self-possession gutters"
- **Line 102:** "all," "our," "friends"
- **Line 103:** "all," "our"
- **Line 108:** "I shall sit here, serving tea to friends."
- **Line 110:** "dance"
- **Lines 110-111:** "dance / Like a dancing bear"
- **Line 112:** "Cry like a parrot," "chatter like an ape"
- **Line 113:** "Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance"
- **Line 114:** "should die," "afternoon"
- **Line 115:** "Afternoon grey and smoky," "evening yellow and rose"
- **Line 116:** "Should die"
- **Line 119:** "or"
- **Line 120:** "Or," "or," "or"
- **Line 122:** "dying"
- **Line 123:** "dying"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem features a few rhetorical questions. The lady poses the first one, which she immediately answers herself:

> But what have I, but what have I, my friend.
> To give you, what can you receive from me?
> Only the friendship and the sympathy
> Of one about to reach her journey's end.

This device allows the lady to ask the speaker what she and the reader know he's asking himself: what's he getting out of these visits? In asking this question, the lady reveals that she's well aware that he might not think she has much to offer. She then argues that she does, in fact, have something to give him—and in doing so subtly gains some power or authority over him. In fact, almost immediately thereafter the speaker asks himself:

> [...] how can I make a cowardly amends
> For what she has said to me?

Here, the rhetorical question reveals the speaker's uncertainty and exasperation, which contrasts with the lady's awareness and control above.

Indeed, the other rhetorical questions in the poem pop up within the speaker's internal monologue, suggesting his increasing uncertainty. For instance, he wonders if other people's romantic desires are "right or wrong," and if the woman would "have the advantage, after all" if she were to die. These questions are perhaps not truly rhetorical, in that they seem to have no answer at all rather than an implied answer. They reflect the speaker growing insecure and confused, which, in turn, suggests that he actually has been affected by his conversations with the lady.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 64-65:** "But what have I, but what have I, my friend, / To give you, what can you receive from me?"
- **Lines 69-70:** "how can I make a cowardly amends / For what she has said to me?"
- **Line 83:** "Are these ideas right or wrong?"
- **Line 121:** "Would she not have the advantage, after all?"
- **Line 124:** "And should I have the right to smile?"

SIMILE

The poem's similes are all part of the speaker's internal monologue. As such, these similes offer the audience some insight into the speaker's feelings about what happens in the poem.

First, the speaker compares the lady's voice to "the insistent out-of-tune / Of a broken violin." This suggests that her voice is relentless and unpleasant to the ear. In other words, he's sick of listening to her.

The other similes appear in the poem's third section and describe the speaker's feelings during his final visit with the lady. First, he says:

I mount the stairs and turn the handle of the door
And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees.

This simile suggests that the speaker feels submissive, as if he has been "brought to his knees" by the lady.

Then, after the lady says that they've never become real friends, he says:

I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark
Suddenly, his expression in a glass.

In other words, he likens himself to a person who's shocked and repelled by his own reflection. This simile thus reinforces the fact that he is not only anxious about how others perceive him, but also feels like he's *failing* to maintain his composure. This, in turn, shows much the lady's words have affected him.

Finally, at the end of their last conversation, the speaker says:

And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression ... dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.

This rapid series of similes suggests that the speaker is frantic. He seems desperate to let his emotions out but doesn't know how to do, so he resorts to imitating animals. He comes across as a blathering fool.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 56-57:** "The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune / Of a broken violin on an August afternoon"
- **Line 87:** "feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees"
- **Lines 99-100:** "I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark / Suddenly, his expression in a glass"
- **Lines 110-111:** "dance, dance / Like a dancing bear"
- **Line 112:** "Cry like a parrot," "chatter like an ape"

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The poem uses a stream of consciousness style, which grants readers insight into the way that the speaker's mind works. Note in particular how the lady's casual dialogue is interspersed with the speaker's interior monologue, typically with no breaks in between to signal this sudden transition in perspectives. This highlights the contrast between these two characters—between what the lady *says* and what the speaker *hears*, and between how the speaker *acts* and what he actually *feels*.

As an example, note how this stream of consciousness style places the lady's romantic statements right next to the speaker's callous judgements in lines 54 to 59:

"I feel immeasurably at peace, and find the world
To be wonderful and youthful, after all."

The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune
Of a broken violin on an August afternoon.
"I am always sure that you understand
My feelings [...]

Readers can see here how the lady's sentimentality drives the speaker away. There's also irony here, in the sense that the lady muses about how much the speaker understands her even as the speaker internally compares her voice to the grating sound of a "broken violin." In this way, stream of consciousness enables the stark contrast between the two characters, reinforcing their miscommunication and incompatibility; the lady's attempts at intimacy just make the speaker think of horrible music.

More broadly, the stream of consciousness style provides a nuanced picture of the speaker as a character. It mimics the organic ebbs and flows of the speaker's thoughts and experiences, relaying his sensory impressions, musings, actions, and so on as they come. It allows the audience to enter the speaker's *experience* of thinking as if they are stepping into his shoes in real-time.

Where Stream of Consciousness appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40
- Lines 41-83
- Lines 84-124

VOCABULARY

Fornication (Before Line 1) - Extramarital sex.

Wench (Before Line 1) - Archaic term for a young woman, especially a servant or sex worker.

The Jew of Malta (Before Line 1) - A play written by Christopher Marlowe in 1589 or 1590. It follows Barabas, a Maltese Jewish Merchant, as he carries out a series of murderous plots. This epigraph is taken from Act IV, when two friars accuse Barabas of murder, but he repeatedly interrupts them by admitting to various unrelated crimes. Here, he interrupts Friar Barnadine by confessing to having extramarital sex. The original text reads:

Friar Barnadine: Thou has committed—

Barabas: Fornication: but that was in another country;
And besides, the wench is dead.

Juliet's Tomb (Line 6) - Here, the speaker refers to Juliet from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. More specifically, the speaker references Juliet's family crypt (or burial place), where both she

and Romeo take their own lives at the end of the play.

Chopin (Line 8, Line 10) - Frédéric François Chopin, a Polish composer and pianist who lived, wrote, and performed throughout the first half of the 1800s. Chopin is closely associated with the expressive, emotional spirit of the Romantic era and remains one of the best-known composers to this day.

Prelude (Line 9, Line 33) - A short piece of music, usually one that introduces a longer work. When the speaker refers to "the Preludes," he means the ones written by the Polish composer Frédéric Chopin.

Resurrected (Line 11) - Brought back to life. The lady compares playing Chopin's music to reviving his soul.

Velleities (Line 15) - Desires or inclinations, but ones that aren't quite strong enough to actually inspire any kind of action.

Attenuated (Line 16) - Weakened. Here, the speaker means that the violin music playing in the background has gotten quieter or maybe grown stale since the conversation began.

Remote (Line 17) - Distant or removed. The word can be used to describe people who are emotionally aloof.

Cornet (Line 17, Line 31) - Brass musical instrument closely related to the trumpet.

Keen (Line 23) - Sharp and perceptive.

Cauchemar (Line 28) - A French word for "nightmare."

Ariette (Line 30) - A short aria (which is an extended musical composition for a solo vocalist).

Tom-tom (Line 32) - A hand-drum.

Capricious (Line 34) - Changing often; unpredictable.

Monotone (Line 34) - A sound without variation in pitch or intonation. The word is often used to describe someone's voice as dull or inexpressive. "Capricious monotone" is an oxymoron, since "capricious" describes something that changes often, while "monotone" describes something that doesn't change at all. This could be taken to mean that, although the exact sounds echoing in the speaker's head change frequently, the overall effect is dull and repetitive.

"False Note" (Line 35) - A purposefully muffled musical note that has a discernible rhythm but no distinct pitch. A "false note" could also refer to a note that is incorrectly played in a musical performance. Additionally, this phrase can be used idiomatically to describe behavior that is perceived as insincere or inappropriate.

Bock (Line 40) - A strong beer traditionally brewed in the autumn months, aged throughout winter, and drunk in the spring.

Buried Life (Line 53) - An allusion to Matthew Arnold's poem "The Buried Life," whose speaker laments the rareness of true connection and vulnerability, suggesting that love is the key to better understanding the "buried lives"—or the hidden, internal lives—of oneself and others.

Gulf (Line 60) - A large gap between two things. The lady calls attention to the age difference between herself and the speaker, which she thinks leads to differing perspectives on life; nonetheless, she hopes the speaker will make an effort to bridge that divide.

Invulnerable (Line 61) - Unable to be harmed, damaged, defeated, etc.

Achilles' Heel (Line 61) - A weakness or vulnerability, especially a small shortcoming that leads to a total downfall. This phrase alludes to Achilles, a key figure in ancient Greek mythology who was said to be the strongest warrior in the Greek army during the Trojan war. Achilles was totally immortal except for one spot on his heel, which is how he was ultimately killed.

Make A Cowardly Amends (Line 69) - Correct a mistake or make up for bad behavior by showing remorse.

Countess (Line 74) - A noblewoman whose rank is equal to that of a count or earl.

Bank Defaulter (Line 76) - Someone who fails to repay a loan to a bank.

Keep My Countenance (Line 77) - Maintain a composed or natural appearance.

Self-Possessed (Line 78, Line 94, Line 101) - Cool, calm, and collected. People who are "self-possessed" are composed and in control of their emotions.

Hyacinth (Line 81) - A plant with many small flowers that grow around a single stem.

Mount (Line 86, Line 87) - Climb.

Bric-à-brac (Line 92) - Random and usually inexpensive objects; knickknacks.

Reckoned (Line 95) - Expected, anticipated, etc.

Gutter (Line 101) - When applied to a flame, "gutter" means to burn weakly and/or unsteadily. The speaker uses this term metaphorically to suggest that his composure is shaken.

Tardy (Line 120) - Slow, delayed, or late.

"Dying fall" (Line 122) - In music, a "dying fall" is a decrescendo (a gradual decrease in volume). This is likely an allusion to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, in which Duke Orsino is reminded of his lover while listening to music, famously remarking, "That strain again, it had a dying fall."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Portrait of a Lady" is written in a stream of consciousness

style, meaning that the language mimics the organic flow of the speaker's thoughts. This technique gives readers access to the speaker's mind in real-time. And as would make sense for such a loosely flowing poem, "Portrait of a Lady" is written in free verse. It does use rhyme and meter from time to time, but it never sticks to a *particular* meter or rhyme scheme for long. Instead, the poem's long, sprawling stanzas and uneven line lengths evoke the speaker's meandering thoughts.

That said, the poem is arranged into three parts of similar lengths, each of which represents one of the speaker's visits to the lady's home over the course of a year. These parts correspond with the changing seasons:

- Part I takes place during a visit in winter;
- Part 2 takes place in the spring;
- Part 3 takes place in autumn.

Each part also follows the same narrative structure:

- The speaker has a conversation with the lady;
- The conversation becomes more and more personal;
- The speaker leaves feeling irked and unsure of himself.

These parallel narratives reinforce the *repetitiveness* of these meetings. And, as a result, any *breaks* from this narrative structure draw attention. In particular, throughout the third and final section, the speaker seems uncomfortable and struggles to maintain his composure *throughout the entire interaction* (presumably because his "self-possession" has already degraded beyond repair, and he feels guilty about how he's treated the lady by this point in their relationship).

METER

While this poem does not follow a strict meter and is probably best deemed free verse, it is *mostly* made up of iambs (poetic feet with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, da-DUM). The actual *number* of syllables per line varies greatly, but this general iambic *rhythm* stays the same regardless. For example, here's a look at the meter in lines 29-31:

> Among the winding of the violins
> And the ariettes
> Of cracked cornets

As readers can see here, even these lines aren't *entirely* iambic ("And the ar-" is a foot called an anapest, da-da-DUM), but, in general, there's a bouncy, rising rhythm, with unstressed beats being followed up by stressed beats throughout the poem. This makes the poem feel generally rhythmic and perhaps even a bit monotonous or stilted. In this way, the iambic rhythm subtly reflects the calculated, formal nature of the speaker and the lady's interactions.

At the same, there's nothing overly strict about this iambic meter. Lines switch things up all the time, which is in keeping with the poem's broader stream of consciousness style, and which keeps the poem feeling immediate and conversational.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem uses plenty of rhyme, but it doesn't follow a particular rhyme scheme. Most lines, in fact, rhyme will with another at some point in the poem, but there's no clear pattern to this. Some rhymes appear very close together, as in lines 12-13:

> Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom
> That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room."

Other rhymes are so far apart that readers might miss them, as in lines 23 and 28:

> How keen you are!)
> [...]
> Without these friendships — life, what *cauchemar*!"

The poem is thus musical but still conversational; its rhyme aren't overly obvious or formulaic.

Occasionally, the appearance of several rhymes in rapid succession suggests a state of emotional frenzy. For instance, in lines 105-107, the lady assures the speaker that she can accept the fact that they haven't become friends even as her rapid, frantic statements suggest she's not all that happy about this turn of events:

> We must leave it now to fate.
> You will write, at any rate.
> Perhaps it is not too late.

On the other hand, lines without a rhyming pair at all in the poem create a sense of discomfort—almost as if a word is out of place or going unacknowledged. Unrhymed lines tend to reinforce the suggestion that something is "off," such as when the speaker notices a "false note" in line 35, or imagines being surprised by "his expression in a glass" in line 100.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Portrait of a Lady" is a young man who pays frequent visits to an older woman who clearly wants to form a more intimate relationship with him. Despite the lady's attempts to grow closer, though, the speaker comes across as somewhat callous or—at the very least—unsure about the idea of forming a tight bond with her. Seeing these visits as little more than dreadful social obligations, the speaker makes every

attempt to maintain a sense of emotional distance. Part of this means politely keeping his true feelings hidden, smiling regardless of his irritation or discomfort.

Since the lady and the speaker are engaged in a cat-and-mouse courtship governed by social conventions, it's reasonable to assume that the speaker is a man. Based on the lady's comments, readers also understand that he's a *young* man, or at least notably younger than her. And given that he travels abroad, it's evident that he's an upper-class man—a member of "polite society."

The speaker is often thought to be an alter ego of Eliot himself, who moved in similar social circles and encountered many figures like both the lady and the speaker. Eliot also traveled abroad and corresponded at length with a woman named Emily Hale, who expected him to marry her (though he never did). Many scholars believe this poem is inspired by their relationship, which was known to be highly formal and polite.

SETTING

The poem seems to take place at some point in the 19th or 20th century, when it would have been especially common for people to attend concerts to hear Frédéric Chopin's "Preludes." And though references to smog imply that "Portrait of a Lady" is set in a city, the majority of the poem's events take place in the lady's home, presumably in a drawing room or another intimate space for entertaining guests. This home is full of "bric-à-brac" (random, meaningless items of little worth), but she tries to set a romantic mood with music, candles, and flowers.

Tired of the lady's sentimentality and attempts at intimacy, the speaker seems to prefer spending time in public spaces like a park or garden. The lady's home, then, perhaps represents a kind of intimacy the speaker is hesitant to embrace, whereas public spaces represent a sense of emotional distance—something the speaker is more comfortable with.

However, the city doesn't actually seem to satisfy the speaker all that much, since his activities—like reading the newspaper in the park and listening to people play the same old songs on a nearby piano—are empty and repetitive. Both of the poem's main settings (the lady's home and the surrounding city) are therefore characterized by oppressive boredom and anxiety, reflecting the *universal* horror of the modern world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

T. S. Eliot wrote "Portrait of a Lady" while studying abroad in Paris from 1910 to 1911. This was a productive time for the young poet—a period during which he also wrote "Preludes," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and other key early works. In fact, these poems appear together in his 1917 collection *Prufrock and Other Observations*.

In the book, "Portrait of a Lady" appears directly after "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and is often discussed as its companion piece, since both satirize modern society through a stream-of-consciousness portrayal of failed romance. However, the gender dynamics are reversed; in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the speaker (Prufrock) is a lonely older *man* who struggles to express his feelings and forge the intimate relationships he craves. Prufrock himself could thus be seen as an older version of the speaker in "Portrait of a Lady"—especially if that speaker ends up disregarding the lady's warnings and continues to lead a rudderless, emotionally detached life.

Before setting off for Paris, Eliot came across the works of the French Symbolists and was taken by the work of Jules Laforgue and Charles Baudelaire. He admired their vivid, symbolic images, which viscerally conveyed emotion while still leaving room for analysis. As Eliot turned towards Symbolism, he also turned away from the expressive ideals of Romanticism. This shift helped usher in Modernism, the largest and most influential artistic movement of the 20th century.

"Portrait of a Lady" contains quintessential elements of modernist literature, which often uses free verse, a detached speaker, and multiple cultural references. Eliot frequently alluded to great literary works of the past, borrowing images, phrases, and ideas. This called attention to obscure or largely forgotten works—like, for example, the Marlowe epigraph at the beginning of "Portrait of a Lady."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1888, Eliot grew up during the Second Industrial Revolution and saw the rapid development of the midwestern United States. He also witnessed the resulting environmental devastation and the atmosphere of anxiety that came with such sudden mechanized change.

The late 1800s are now known as the "Gilded Age"—a time of excess and consumption for the rich, who became richer as the poor grew poorer. Eliot himself was a member of a well-to-do family with a prestigious reputation, and he traveled in Europe in the early 1900s, experiencing great leisure even in a time of growing economic inequality. These travels exposed him to the art and culture of international cities, but he also absorbed the urban landscapes, perhaps noticing the poverty present in even the most opulent cities. In other words, Eliot always saw—and portrayed—both sides of city life.

Given the status of Eliot's family, he was intimately familiar with the restrictive norms and social practices of the upper class. For example, women were expected not to be too "forward" about their desires, and romantic advancements were supposed to be declined delicately—a convention that Eliot

spotlights in "Portrait of a Lady."

Many scholars have concluded that the events of this poem are based on Eliot's real-life relationship with a woman named Emily Hale. There was not a pronounced age gap between the two (Eliot was older by a few years), but Eliot and Hale had an extremely drawn-out courtship that included over 1,000 letters. Hale expected Eliot to marry her, but he never did.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- T. S. Eliot Reads "Portrait of a Lady" — Listen to the author read the poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iVmqijakCg&ab_channel=luckdial)
- First Edition — Look through digital scans of a first edition copy of "Prufrock and Other Observations," the 1917 collection in which this poem appears. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/prufrock-and-other-observations-by-t-s-eliot)
- The Poet's Failed Romance — Learn more about Eliot's recently unveiled correspondences with Emily Hale, which he did not want to become public. (https://paw.princeton.edu/article/letters-emily)
- Biography of the Poet — Browse this thorough profile of Eliot, which details his personal life, poetic output, and other cultural contributions. (https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-32993)
- The Turn of the 20th Century — Take a look at this snapshot of American life during the early 20th century. (https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/twentieth-century-society-united-states/)
- An Introduction to Modernism — Read an overview of Modernism, the artistic movement that Eliot helped advance. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152025/an-introduction-to-modernism)
- The Art of Poetry Interview — A conversation with the poet from 1959, launching the popular and long-running "Art of Poetry" interview series from literary magazine The Paris Review. (https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4738/the-art-of-poetry-no-1-t-s-eliot)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER T. S. ELIOT POEMS

- Journey of the Magi
- Preludes
- Rhapsody on a Windy Night
- The Hollow Men
- The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
- The Waste Land

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