

Morning at the Window



POEM TEXT

- 1 They are rattling breakfast plates in basement
kitchens,
- 2 And along the trampled edges of the street
- 3 I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids
- 4 Sprouting despondently at area gates.

- 5 The brown waves of fog toss up to me
- 6 Twisted faces from the bottom of the street,
- 7 And tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts
- 8 An aimless smile that hovers in the air
- 9 And vanishes along the level of the roofs.

presented as an anonymous "They" who "rattl[e] breakfast plates in basement kitchens" (preparing food for their employers). Housemaids emerge like poor "souls" from their underworld, "Sprouting despondently" at the gates, presumably to run some errand for their employers.

Life at the "bottom," the poem suggests, is tough. The housemaids have souls "damp[ened]" by their socio-economic position (which explains why they "Sprout[]" despondently," rather than, say, "emerge jubilantly"). They don't really want to be there, in other words, but they have no choice.

The street's "brown waves of fog" and "trampled edges," meanwhile, add to the gloomy atmosphere, while the "muddy skirts" of a "passer-by" (possibly one of those housemaids) suggest poverty and neglect. The faces in the street look "Twisted" by anger, pain, etc. In fact, the references to "souls" and "Twisted faces" make this urban atmosphere sound downright *hellish*. In this setting, a single "smile" is an anomaly that catches the speaker's attention.

The divide between the speaker, who is likely of a higher class, and the people below reflects a broader sense of urban alienation. The poem suggests that modern city life, polluted by industry and stratified by the class system, prevents people from relating to each other.

"Waves of fog" ("brown[ed]" by city pollution) drift between the speaker and the people the speaker watches, obscuring them from one another. The "faces" below appear to the speaker as disembodied, "Twisted" images "toss[ed] up" by the fog. A passer-by's smile—normally a symbol of human intimacy and connection—has nowhere to go, hovering "aimless[ly]" before "vanish[ing] along the level of the roofs." In a way, the smile is able to rise to the speaker's height—but its owner, kept at a distance by the city's physical/social divisions, doesn't and can't. In short, this urban environment seems to prohibit genuine connection.

It's important to note that the poem doesn't go beyond sketch-like observation. That is, the speaker doesn't directly *critique* what they see; they just describe it. Their perspective is dependent on their physical and social position, making them a potentially biased narrator. The poem hints at a broader statement about modern urban alienation, but ultimately, its style is as murky, unresolvable, and fragmentary as the scene it depicts.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9



SUMMARY

The speaker hears the clatter of plates as servants prepare breakfast in kitchens located in basements. They can sense the melancholy spirits of housemaids trudging down the well-worn sides of the street, after having emerged dejectedly from the gates of their respective houses.

Dingy swaths of fog roll by, now and then revealing the uncomfortable faces of the people on the street down below. A smile, ripped from someone wearing a dirty skirt, drifts up through the air before disappearing along the rooftops.



THEMES



CLASS, ALIENATION, AND MODERN LIFE

The speaker of "Morning at the Window" looks down onto a busy street, watching as "housemaids" and other service workers go about their morning business. Their faces are "twisted" and despondent, suggesting that these working-class people lead unhappy, difficult lives in a dingy, dismal urban setting. The single "smile" the speaker witnesses doesn't connect with anyone, including the speaker. Through briefly sketched details, the poem suggests that modern life—especially for those lower in the class system—is profoundly limiting and alienating.

The poem presents a street quite literally divided by class: while "housemaids" and kitchen staff live *down there*, the speaker has a privileged vantage point from a window above them. Servants work below the people they serve. They're



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

They are rattling breakfast plates in basement kitchens,

The poem's title sets the scene: it's early in the day ("morning"), and the speaker looks down on the world below from a high vantage point (the window).

The first line, though, describes a sound rather than a sight: the clinking and "rattling" of "breakfast places in basement kitchens." This auditory [imagery](#) drops the reader right into the middle of a scene without any preamble. It's almost as if the speaker is woken by the sound of "rattling breakfast plates," making this the first observation of their day.

The line itself is noisy, with bold /b/ alliteration and spiky /t/ and /k/ [consonance](#) evoking the "rattling" being described: "rattling breakfast plates in basement kitchens."

The fact that the servants are consigned to the basements, below the speaker, [symbolizes](#) their lower-class status. Notice, too, how the speaker doesn't start with a word like "servants" or "staff." Instead, the speaker just says "they." This distances the speaker (and the reader, for that matter) from the workers getting breakfast ready. These workers are an anonymous, indistinct group rather than individuals with their own agency and identity.

LINES 2-4

*And along the trampled edges of the street
I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids
Sprouting despondently at area gates.*

Having told readers what the speaker can *hear*, now the speaker looks out onto the street below and describes what they can *see*: downtrodden maids emerging from gates in front of houses (perhaps the same houses with basement kitchens), presumably to run errands on behalf of their employers and/or to get supplies for breakfast.

Once again, the speaker distances themselves and the reader from the workers. Look at how lines 2 and 3 delay the arrival of the housemaids, placing the "trampled edges of the street" between themselves and these women:

And along the trampled edges of the street
I am aware of the damp souls of **housemaids**

That the edges of the street are "trampled" implies that they're well-worn; servants walk up and down these streets day in and day out. The word "trampled" also suggests that this urban environment itself is just as beaten down as its inhabitants.

Note, too, that the speaker doesn't name the housemaids *directly*. Instead, the speaker is "aware" of their "damp souls"; the speaker can sense their sad *presence*, their very souls made

heavy and limp by the realities of modern life.

These souls, the speaker says, are "Sprouting despondently at area gates." In other words, they seem to suddenly pop out of the "gates" to various residences, "sprouting" like weeds. This [metaphor](#) dehumanizes the housemaids, while the adverb "despondently" conveys just how miserable they are.

These lines are packed with [sibilance](#):

[...] street
I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids
Sprouting despondently at area gates.

Those hissing /s/ sounds suggest the speaker's distaste for the scene at hand. The thick enjambment of these lines, meanwhile, adds to the tone's sprawling feel. It sounds like these are unfiltered observations that the speaker is making in the moment.

LINES 5-6

*The brown waves of fog toss up to me
Twisted faces from the bottom of the street,*

Line 5 offers up more [imagery](#) of urban decay and misery. "Brown waves of fog" fill the street below, likely the product of industrial pollution. These waves of fog [metaphorically](#) "toss" people's faces "up to" the speaker. In other words, the speaker catches fleeting glimpses of people's faces on the street as this fog rolls by their window.

This description [personifies](#) the fog while dehumanizing those faces, separating them from the human beings they belong to. The description also portrays the faces as unimportant and inconsequential: to "toss" something is to throw it carelessly/casually. The speaker interprets these floating faces as "Twisted"—that is, contorted, implicitly in pain or despair. These people aren't smiling or serene; they're miserable.

The winding syntax (word order) of these lines once again distances the speaker from the people below. In the previous stanza, the speaker delayed the mention of the "housemaids" themselves, who appeared only after the speaker had described "the trampled edges of the street."

The speaker does something similar here: though the speaker says that the fog tosses something up to them in line 5, it's not until the following line that the reader finds out *what*, exactly, is being tossed. This slight delay, created through [enjambment](#), once again *distances* the speaker from the common working folk down below.

Even though the speaker offers no details about their own identity/situation, the fact that they look down on this scene creates a [juxtaposition](#) between themselves and the workers. The speaker has a privileged vantage point and the time to observe the world below at their own leisure. The people on the street all have jobs to do! The physical divisions in the poem

mirror the class divisions of the society the speaker describes.

LINES 7-9

*And tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts
An aimless smile that hovers in the air
And vanishes along the level of the roofs.*

The poem ends with a haunting image: a disembodied smile floats up from street level to the speaker's window.

In terms of the grammar, the main subject is still the "brown waves of fog" mentioned in line 5. Those waves of fog are what now:

[...] tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts
An aimless smile that hovers in the air
And vanishes along the level of the roofs.

Continued [enjambment](#) (highlighted above) makes these lines stretch and bend like those dirty waves of fog. The poem is slow and plodding, reflecting the dull tedium of the world the speaker sees from their window.

Like the "Twisted faces" and "damp souls" from earlier in the poem, the speaker presents this smile as detached from a body, stripping the gesture of individuality, identity, warmth, and so forth. The woman wearing this smile, whose "muddy skirts" reflect the dirtiness of the street and perhaps her own poverty, is just an anonymous "passer-by."

It's not clear if she was smiling at the speaker (perhaps out of deference to those above her in the class system) or to herself. Either way, the fog [metaphorically](#) rips this smile from her face. The word "tear" is violent, suggesting that the cruel, brutal nature of urban life steals people's joy. Now "aimless," without a purpose, the smile can only float briefly "in the air" before disappearing "along the level of the roofs."

The last line two lines are the most metrically regular in the poem. They use [iambic](#) pentameter (five iambs in a row) and hexameter (six iambs in a row):

An aim- | less smile | that ho- | vers in | the air
And van- | ishes | along | the le- | vel of | the roofs.

The steady da-DUM rhythm of those iambs creates a sense of boredom and drudgery.



SYMBOLS



THE DIVIDE BETWEEN THE WINDOW AND THE STREET

While the speaker (and, implicitly, the street's wealthier inhabitants) reside on high, the servants are consigned to the street and "basement kitchens" below. This

vertical divide neatly represents the societal divide between upper and lower classes, or between the *haves* and *have-nots*: those with money and leisure time and those struggling just to get by.

The physical distance between these realms allows the upper class to dehumanize the workers below. Note how the speaker presents those "twisted faces," the "aimless smile," and the housemaids' "damp souls" as though they exist independently of actual human beings. The lower classes are an anonymous "they" from the speaker's vantage point.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "basement kitchens"
- **Line 2:** "the trampled edges of the street"
- **Line 4:** "area gates"
- **Line 6:** "the bottom of the street"
- **Line 8:** "hovers in the air"
- **Line 9:** "the level of the roofs"



POETIC DEVICES

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) and [alliteration](#) add to the poem's gloomy morning atmosphere.

In the first line, the strong /b/ alliteration of "breakfast" and "basement" combines with the spiky consonance of /t/ and /k/ sounds to evoke the clang and clamor that the speaker describes:

They are rattling breakfast plates in basement
kitchens,

Hissing /s/ sounds and the plosive /p/ of "plates" add to the effect, creating a [cacophonous](#) and intense opening. Perhaps all this noise from the kitchen has woken the speaker up!

[Sibilance](#) and crisp /t/ consonance dominate the rest of the poem, as in lines 3-8:

[...] souls of housemaids
Sprouting despondently at area gates.
The brown waves of fog toss up to me
Twisted faces from the bottom of the street,
And tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts
An aimless smile [...]

This spitting mixture of sounds might convey the speaker's distaste for the scene at hand. Those /t/ sounds are sharp and crisp, while the quiet sibilance evokes the way those "brown waves of fog" seem to muffle, or put a damper, on life on the street.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "rattling breakfast plates," "basement kitchens"
- **Line 2:** "trampled," "street"
- **Line 3:** "souls," "housemaids"
- **Line 4:** "Sprouting despondently," "gates"
- **Line 5:** "toss," "to"
- **Line 6:** "Twisted faces," "bottom," "street"
- **Line 7:** "passer-by," "skirts"
- **Line 8:** "aimless smile"

ENJAMBMENT

"Morning at the Window" consists of two long, meandering sentences. As a result, readers feel like they're getting access to the speaker's unfiltered thoughts as they unfold. The poem's use of [enjambment](#) adds to the poem's spontaneous feel, and it also emphasizes the fact that the speaker is a passive observer of all that's going on down below.

Notice the strange word order of lines 2-3, for example. First comes the speaker's impression of the street, followed by the speaker's being "aware" of something, and then finally the housemaids themselves arrive:

And along the trampled edges of the street
I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids

The poem delays the introduction of the housewives, and in doing so makes them seem all the more distant from the speaker up there in the window.

Likewise, the line break between lines 5 and 6 separates the speaker ("me") from the "Twisted faces" down below. This reinforces the [juxtaposition](#) between the speaker and the common folk going about their business on the street.

The break between 7 and 8 has a similar effect:

And tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts
An aimless smile that hovers in the air

This enjambment separates the "aimless smile" from its owner. In doing so, it reflects the alienating, isolating nature of the urban world the poem describes.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "street / I"
- **Lines 3-4:** "housemaids / Sprouting"
- **Lines 5-6:** "me / Twisted"
- **Lines 7-8:** "skirts / An"

IMAGERY

"Morning at the Window" is filled with [imagery](#). In fact, the poem almost consists of nothing but imagery as the speaker

relays their perception of the world outside their window. These vivid details make life on the street seem grungy, miserable, and monotonous.

The poem begins with a sound: the "rattling" of "breakfast plates," which burbles up from the "basement kitchens" where servants get things ready for their employers. Placed right at the poem's opening top, perhaps this also suggests that the speaker is woken up by this sound.

The rest of the imagery creates an atmosphere of hopelessness and alienation. The "trampled edges of the street" suggest that the street itself has been beaten down and neglected, not unlike the working-class people who tread up and down it each day.

In lines 3 and 4, the speaker combines imagery with [metaphor](#) to describe the housemaids going about their business:

I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids
Sprouting despondently at area gates.

These "souls" are "damp" because they appear to have given up on life; they're like extinguished fires, no longer capable of burning brightly. They emerge from the gates of their employers' homes like "sprouting" plants, an image that, in another poem, might convey their vivacity and potential. Here, though, it dehumanizes the maids. The use of "despondently" completely undoes any suggestion of healthy growth that "Sprouting" might carry. They're forced to keep emerging from these "area gates" day in and day out.

The second stanza's imagery doesn't get any cheerier. "Brown waves of fog" allude to industrial pollution, which here obscures the street below ([symbolically](#) reflecting the way that modern life increasingly divides the rich from the poor). The fog turns the people down below into strange, haunted figures. The faces that float up to the speaker's window (i.e., that the speaker sees occasionally through the fog) are "Twisted," in pain or despair.

A single smile seems "aimless," or purposeless, hovering in the air without a human being attached. That the [personified](#) fog has torn this face "from a passer-by" implies that modern, urban life violently tears away people's happiness.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 8-9

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem [juxtaposes](#) the speaker's position against that of the housemaids/servants. The distance between the speaker, at

their window, and the people working below represents the divide between the upper and lower classes.

The poem repeatedly calls attention to the speaker's vantage point. The title tells readers that the speaker is watching from a window. The fog tosses faces "up to" the speaker, a smile "hovers in the air," and the speaker has a clear view of "the roofs" of neighboring buildings.

The lower class, by contrast, are in "basement kitchens" or walking along "the trampled edges of the street." They're at the "bottom of the street," the speaker reiterates in the second stanza. The fact that "a passer-by" has muddy skirts also calls attention to the fact that she's far below the speaker, as her garments are sweeping across the dirty ground.

Think, too, about the implied juxtaposition between what the speaker and the workers are up to during the poem. While the servants and housemaids are already going about their business, the speaker cuts a much more leisurely figure. At the very least, the speaker has time to gaze out of the window while the people below are off to work.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "in basement kitchens"
- **Line 2:** "the trampled edges of the street"
- **Line 5:** "toss up to me"
- **Line 6:** "the bottom of the street"
- **Line 7:** "muddy skirts"
- **Line 8:** "hovers in the air"
- **Line 9:** "the level of the roofs"



VOCABULARY

Trampled (Line 2) - Worn down by footsteps.

Sprouting (Line 4) - Appearing suddenly or starting to grow, as flowers/plants do.

Despondently (Line 4) - With a sad, disheartened, discouraged air.

Area gates (Line 4) - The gates in front of the houses where the maids work, which lead onto the main street.

Toss up (Line 5) - Throw casually/carelessly.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Morning at the Window" consists of a quatrain (a four-line stanza) followed by a quintain (a five-line stanza). Each stanza is also a single, sprawling sentence, making it feel as though readers are getting access to the speaker's unfiltered, in-the-moment thoughts.

The poem's brevity also makes it feel like a snapshot, offering a quick yet striking impression of a city morning. In this way, the poem fits within the formal tendencies of Imagist poetry, an influential literary movement of the early 20th century that dovetailed with modernism. Imagist poets sought to capture vivid scenes in precise language, which is exactly what Eliot does here.

METER

"Morning at the Window" doesn't use a strict [meter](#). That said, it's not entirely [free verse](#) either.

That's because most of the lines here have five stresses (or so), and these stresses sometimes fall into a steady [iambic](#) pattern (da-DUM). As such, the poem approaches iambic pentameter at times. The poem is thus a kind of hybrid between free verse, iambic pentameter, and accentual meter. This mixture of formal meter and linguistic looseness suits the poem's air of detachment mixed with astute observation.

The last two lines—iambic pentameter and hexameter (six feet) respectively—are the most regular in the poem:

An aim- | less smile | that ho- | vers in | the air
And van- | ishes | along | the le- | vel of | the roofs.

These two lines seem to conjure both momentum and monotony at the same time. That disembodied smile is on the move, yet it's also going nowhere. Augustan poet Alexander Pope famously said that a line of iambic hexameter (a.k.a an alexandrine) "drags its slow length along." And that long, plodding final line ends the poem in a way that subtly captures the drudgery of urban life.

RHYME SCHEME

"Morning at the Window" doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#). There's a hint of rhyme between "housemaids" and "gates" in lines 3-4 and then between "me" and "street" in lines 5-6, but that's about it! The lack of rhyme makes the poem feel casual and semi-improvised, as though it is taking place in real time and prioritising observational detail over technical virtuosity.



SPEAKER

"Morning at the Window" uses a first-person speaker who, as the title suggests, is looking out of a window and observing the street below. The whole poem is filtered through the speaker's perspective, yet the reader learns almost nothing about this person.

What readers *can* guess is that the speaker is relatively well off, at least compared to the housemaids and servants preparing breakfast "in basement kitchens." For one thing, the speaker has time to watch these workers rather than immediately heading off to work themselves. The speaker's physical location

above the street also suggests, on a [symbolic](#) level, that they occupy a higher social rung—that they're more upper class—than the figures they observe far below.

As such, readers might take the speaker's observations with a grain of salt. The speaker sees the people they describe only from a distance, and their perception of lower-class life is undoubtedly informed by their own experiences.



SETTING

As the poem's title reveals, "Morning at the Window" takes place at the speaker's window in the morning! More specifically, it's set in a grungy urban environment very early in the day, with the speaker looking out their window at the happenings on the muddy street far below.

Some critics have suggested that the poem was written about London's Russell Square (where Eliot lived for a time), though the poem doesn't offer much by way of specifics. The speaker's observations do suggest, however, that this is a well-off neighborhood. For one thing, there are servants and housemaids hard at work early in the morning. It's also foggy, as London often is.

The fact that this fog rolls past in "brown waves" suggests that it's tinged with pollution. It also obscures the faces of the people below, adding to the sense that modern life is marked by isolation and alienation; there are lots of people present, but they don't really see each other.

The speaker themselves isn't at street level. Instead, they have a privileged vantage point high up above the workers going about their errands. The poem's setting is thus [symbolic](#), representing the stark class divide between the haves and the have-nots.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) most likely wrote "Morning at the Window" in London in 1914 or 1915, during a period of great literary experimentation known as modernism. Modernist writers challenged the established literary norms inherited from the 19th century. These norms were both formal—that is, related to the actual way that poems, plays, and novels were expected to be written—and social: sex, drugs and alcohol, feminism, and working-class life all became new subjects for serious literature during this period.

"Morning at the Window" came early in Eliot's literary career, published in his first collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). The collection's long title poem, "[The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock](#)," expands on the dismal take on urban life, class, and society expressed in "Morning at the Window."

Eliot's models at this time were mainly French Symbolist poets of the late 19th century, such as Jules Laforgue and Stéphane Mallarmé. Symbolism was a movement that rejected Realism in art; instead, it tried to symbolize psychological states through descriptions of the world itself.

In capturing a particular set of observations at a particular moment in time, without giving them a neat form or meaning, "Morning at the Window" also reflects the tenets of Imagist poetry. Imagism refers to a loose-knit movement that encouraged direct, to-the-point language and clear, precise imagery. "[In a Station of the Metro](#)," by Eliot's friend and leading Imagist poet Ezra Pound, captures a similar sense of metropolitan decay and alienation.

Eliot's influence on Western literary culture can hardly be overstated, with poems like "[The Waste Land](#)" and "[Four Quartets](#)" casting a long shadow over 20th-century writing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The early 20th century was a time of immense change. Inventions such as the airplane and telephone altered people's lives immensely in a short space of time, while cities grew denser as more and more people began moving from the countryside to urban centers. New technologies and industries improved the quality of life for many people while also contributing to widespread pollution and unsafe working conditions.

When poems from *Prufrock and Other Observations* were first printed, World War I had just begun. The immense violence of the "Great War" shook ideals inherited from the previous century and shattered the old European order. The new technologies that had seemingly improved life for so many were used to kill on an industrial scale.

This made modernist artists deeply skeptical of the modern world—hence the critical depiction of the city in "Morning at the Window." At the same time, though, modernist thinking stirred up animosity towards older ways of living; after all, it was the old European empires that had led the continent into war.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [London's Russell Square](#) — Learn more about the place that some critics believe inspired the poem's setting. (<https://hidden-london.com/gazetteer/russell-square/>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Hear "Morning at the Window" read by T. S. Eliot himself. (<https://soundcloud.com/harvard/morning-at-the-window?in=harvard/sets/t-s-eliot-reading-his-own-poetry>)
- [Prufrock and Other Observations](#) — Read the entire

collection in which "Morning at the Window" appears.
(<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1459/1459-h/1459-h.htm>)

- [T. S. Eliot's Life and Work](#) – Check out a biography of Eliot with links to more of his writings at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/t-s-eliot>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER T. S. ELIOT POEMS

- [Journey of the Magi](#)
- [Portrait of a Lady](#)
- [Preludes](#)
- [Rhapsody on a Windy Night](#)
- [The Hollow Men](#)
- [The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock](#)
- [The Waste Land](#)



HOW TO CITE

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