

## The Fire Sermon

This passage introduces a key figure in the poem, Tiresias, the Theban prophet who was punished with blindness because he had seen Athena, the goddess of knowledge, bathing naked. In Sophocles's tragedy, Oedipus the King, Tiresias predicts that Thebes will be destroyed.

### Unreal City

in yellow CITY OF LONDON (external setting)

Under the brown fog of a winter noon

no given description of the time

Mr Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant

light blue ~ Mr Eugenides

Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants

5 C.i.f. London<sup>1</sup>: documents at sight,

Asked me in demotic French<sup>2</sup>

To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel

Followed by a weekend at the Metropole<sup>3</sup>.

At the violet hour<sup>4</sup>, when the eyes and back

suggest

10 Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits

orange: refers to the typist

Like a taxi throbbing<sup>4</sup> waiting,

I Tiresias<sup>5</sup>, though blind, throbbing between two lives<sup>6</sup>,

pink: expression referred to Tiresias

Old man with wrinkled female breasts<sup>7</sup>, can see

At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives<sup>8</sup>

Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights

Her stove, and lays out food in tins.

Out of the window perilously spread

Her drying combinations<sup>9</sup> touched by the sun's last rays,

20 On the divan are piled (at night her bed)

Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays<sup>10</sup>.

I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs

Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest<sup>11</sup> -

I too awaited the expected guest.

25 He, the young man carbuncular<sup>12</sup>, arrives,

A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare<sup>13</sup>;

One of the low on whom assurance sits

As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire<sup>14</sup>.

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,

30 The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,

Endeavours<sup>15</sup> to engage her in caresses

Which still are unreproved<sup>16</sup>, if undesired.

Flushed<sup>17</sup> and decided, he assaults at once;

Exploring hands encounter no defence;

35 His vanity requires no response,

And makes a welcome of indifference.

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all

Enacted on this same divan or bed;

I who have sat by Thebes<sup>18</sup> below the wall

40 And walked among the lowest of the dead<sup>19</sup>.)

only explicit  
identification  
of the  
speaker.

gray: expressions referred  
to the typist  
lover

pink words: refers to man's action  
and attitude

blue words: typist's emotions and  
mood

1 C.i.f. London. Costo, assicurazione, nolo inclusi nel prezzo a Londra.

2 demotic French. Francese volgare, popolare.

3 Metropole. Lussuoso albergo di Brighton.

4 throbbing. Che pulsa.

5 Tiresias. Nelle *Metamorfosi* di Ovidio si racconta come Tiresia fu trasformato in donna da un incantesimo e mantenne questa identità per sette anni, al termine dei quali tornò a essere un uomo.

6 between two lives. Tra due vite, due sessi.

7 wrinkled female breasts. Vizzate mammelle di donna.

8 strives. Si strugge.

9 combinations. Stovestiti.

10 stays. Fascette.

11 foretold the rest. Ho predetto il resto.

12 the young man carbuncular. Il giovane pieno di foruncoli.

13 one bold stare. Un solo sguardo ardito.

14 As ... millionaire. Come un cappello di seta su di un milionario di Bradford.

15 Endeavours. Tenta.

16 to engage ... unreproved. Di coinvolgerla in carezze che non sono ancora respinte.

17 Flushed. Eccitato.

18 Thebes. Antica città greca che divenne una terra desolata a causa di una maledizione divina.

19 the lowest of the dead. Gli infimi tra i morti.

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Bestows<sup>20</sup> one final patronising kiss<sup>21</sup>,  
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit<sup>22</sup>...

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
Hardly aware of her departed lover;

45 Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:  
'Well now that's done; and I'm glad it's over.'

When lovely woman stoops to folly and  
Paces about her room again, alone,

She smoothes her hair<sup>23</sup> with automatic hand,

50 And puts a record on the gramophone.

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20 Bestows. Depone, concede.

21 patronising kiss. Bacio condiscendente.

22 gropes ... unlit. Si fa strada a tentoni, trovando le scale buie.

23 She smoothes her hair. Si ravvia i capelli.