

In a London Drawing Room George Eliot



Here's the poem without the line breaks:

The sky is cloudy, yellowed by the smoke. For view there are the houses opposite cutting the sky with one long line of wall like solid fog: far as the eye can stretch monotony of surface & of form without a break to hang a guess upon. No bird can make a shadow as it flies, for all is shadow, as in ways o'erhung by thickest canvass, where the golden rays are clothed in hemp. No figure lingering pauses to feed the hunger of the eye or rest a little on the lap of life. All hurry on & look upon the ground, or glance unmarking at the passers-by. The wheels are hurrying too, cabs, carriages all closed, in multiplied identity. The world seems one huge prison-house & court where men are punished at the slightest cost, with lowest rate of colour, warmth & joy.

The poem is fairly straightforward and the mood is clear! So, what is there to say about it? In the greyness of the poem, is there anything that stands out? Ask students to pick just three words or phrases.

I would highlight 'to hang a guess upon', 'hunger of the eye' and 'huge prison-house' but they will choose a variety of others. Ask for a one or two sentence reason for choosing each of the words / phrases. In the case of my choices, 'Hang a guess upon' is an unusual phrase, stopping readers in their tracks. It brings the poem back from the description of the outside to the writer, inside, bored and with nothing to stimulate thoughts or imagination. Again, 'hunger of the eye' is a striking way of describing the poet's desperation for something interesting to look at. 'Huge prison-house' is striking in a different way because it seems an exaggeration, emphasised by the word 'punished' – but to what extent is that the case?

Other points to raise:

The writer, though a woman, uses 'men' rather than a term to encompass men and women. What word could she use that would still fit comfortably into the line?

The poet saves the most positive words to the last: 'colour, warmth and joy'. The lack of colour is noted throughout the poem but to what extent is the lack of warmth and joy hinted at? (Could warmth mean more than just heat but include human warmth, i.e. interaction and community?)

One of the on-line analyses states that the poem is written in free verse which is untrue. It is in very regular blank verse – five iambs to the line. Try adding an extra syllable or two to some lines – would that make a significant difference or not? For example:

No bird can make a shadow as it flies,
For everything is in shadow, as in ways o'erhung
By thickest canvass, where the sun's golden rays
Are clothed in hemp.

Finally, what images does 'rest a little on the lap of life' conjure up?