



Meaning of “short square fingers” in T. S. Eliot’s Preludes

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Abstract— *In this paper, I have tried to explore and explain the significance of “short square fingers” in Preludes. The meaning becomes clear if we analyse the image from the angle of palmistry and we understand how it fits in with the meaning and theme of the poem.*

Keywords— *short square fingers, astrology, palmistry, fatalism, materialism*

I. INTRODUCTION

T.S. Eliot uses astrological references in some of his works like *The Wasteland* and *Preludes* to explain to an extent the fatality in the spiritual and material wasteland created in the aftermath of World War I. In *The Wasteland* (1922), Madame Sosostris predicts death by drowning through tarot cards and it comes true in the book *Death by Water*. Eliot also refers to the prophets Tiresias and Sibyl to emphasise fatality as they are links between the past and present.

Similarly, in *Preludes* (1917), where T. S. Eliot deals with the loneliness, drudgery and materialism of human existence, we find an astrological reference.

In the poem, in line 43 we find reference to short square fingers, “And short square fingers stuffing pipes”. Why short square fingers? Why refer to a particular shape of finger? What is its significance?

In this paper, I have tried to explore the relevance to the use of “short square fingers” in the poem.

II. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The answer becomes clear if we refer to the *Language of the Hand* by Cheiro (1963). Cheiro had written about short square fingers (p. 29) as follows:

“THE SQUARE HAND WITH SHORT SQUARE FINGERS

This peculiarity is very often found, and very easily recognised. The subject with such a type is materialistic in every sense of the term. He would be the kind of man who would say: “Except I hear with my ears and see with my eyes, I cannot believe.” And even then, I very much doubt if such a man would be convinced. It also denotes an obstinate kind of nature, as a rule, narrow-minded. These people make money, but by plodding; they may not be miserly, but they are business-like and practical; they like to accumulate wealth; it is the material they seek.”

Eliot had always been interested in astrology, mysticism and the occult. And, he referred to short square fingers in *Preludes* with the intention of conveying the “materialism”, “business minded” and “obstinate” nature and “narrow-mindedness” of the owner of the hands.

Eliot had referred to astrology in *The Dry Salvages*, “To communicate with Mars...observe ...biography from the wrinkles of the palm/And tragedy from fingers...” (section V). He goes on to write that people resort to astrology in times of distress, “...all these are usual pastimes and drugs...when there is distress of nations and perplexity...”. The sordid materialism and loneliness suggested in the *Preludes* can only take people to astrology to look for solutions.

The materialistic and narrow-minded people with short square fingers fill in their pipes and in a practical and methodical way scan the newspapers for assessing their

.planned future activities as evening sets in. The reference to “short square fingers” helps us to understand the mindset of the people referred to in the poem.

The shape of the fingers is what we inherit at birth. The reference to this particular shape of finger suggests that only narrow-minded materialistic people are able to survive in such an urban situation.

III. CONCLUSION

A conclusion section must be included and should indicate clearly the advantages, limitations, and possible applications of the paper. Although a conclusion may review the main points of the paper, do not replicate the abstract as the conclusion. A conclusion might elaborate on the importance of the work or suggest applications and extensions. The reference to short square fingers adds to the meaning of Preludes. Narrow-minded materialism and corresponding drudgery are the theme of the poem and when we understand the connotation of “short square fingers” the fact that such people with such a nature can survive in such situations becomes apparent

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