

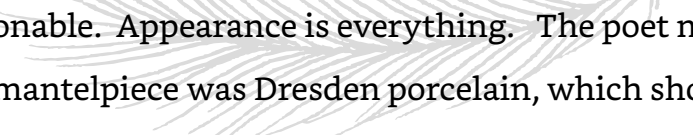
Aunt Helen

Miss Helen Slingsby was my maiden aunt,
And lived in a small house near a fashionable square
Cared for by servants to the number of four.
Now when she died there was silence in heaven
And silence at her end of the street.
The shutters were drawn and the undertaker wiped his feet —
He was aware that this sort of thing had occurred before.
The dogs were handsomely provided for,
But shortly afterwards the parrot died too.
The Dresden clock continued ticking on the mantelpiece,
And the footman sat upon the dining-table
Holding the second housemaid on his knees —
Who had always been so careful while her mistress lived.

Summary and Analysis:

Eliot calls his aunt by her full name, which seems an oddly formal way to describe a relation and immediately introduces the idea of distance or detachment. He also stresses the lack of intimacy in her life by referring to her as a 'maiden aunt'.

The opening lines tell us that the poet's aunt lived in a 'small house', but this was in a 'fashionable area', so she was obviously reasonably well-off. Eliot is clearly mocking the genteel set in society to whom it would be important that

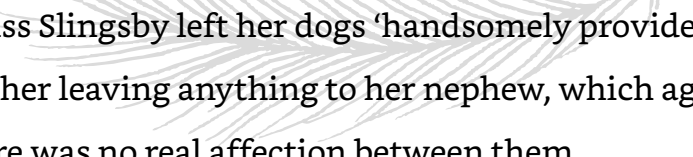


the area be fashionable. Appearance is everything. The poet mentions that the clock on the mantelpiece was Dresden porcelain, which shows that Miss Slingsby took care to surround herself with good-quality, reasonably expensive furnishings. There is a feeling that all of this was meaningless, though, as there is nothing at all to suggest that Aunt Helen had a good time or shared her life with others. Although Miss Slingsby may have had money and physical comfort, she was merely existing rather than living life to the full. We are given no descriptions of the woman herself, rather she is defined by her possessions.

In the third line of the poem Eliot says his aunt was 'Cared for by servants to the number of four'. The language here seems very formal and old-fashioned and that seems to fit in with a rather prim and proper 'maiden aunt' who, despite living in a 'small house' had four servants to care for her.

Another interesting aspect of this phrase is that it first alerts us to Aunt Helen's solitary, unloved existence. The words 'Cared for' could be considered rather sad if looked at in the context of the poem as a whole. After all, the servants took care of Aunt Helen because they were paid to do so, not because they felt any affection for her. Aunt Helen may have been surrounded by people but she was alone, nonetheless.

The fourth line begins with the word 'Now', giving the impression that what will follow is significant and indeed this does initially appear to be the case. We are told there was 'silence in heaven' at her passing. However, this is followed immediately by the line 'And silence at her end of the street'. This can be read in two ways: on the one hand it may mean that there was a respectful silence, but it may also indicate there was no weeping or mourning for the



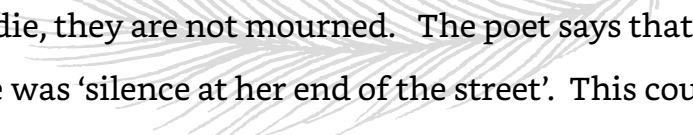
dead woman. Miss Slingsby left her dogs 'handsomely provided for' but there is no mention of her leaving anything to her nephew, which again reinforces the idea that there was no real affection between them.

It is also significant that there is not a single word of grief in the entire poem. The tone is mocking in places such as when he says that the undertaker 'was aware that this sort of thing had occurred before' and that there was 'silence at her end of the street' as well as 'silence in heaven' when she died. We learn that shortly after Miss Slingsby's death, 'the parrot died too', an oddly comical comment that seems to imply both deaths are equally important, or unimportant.

In the tenth line Eliot tells us that 'The Dresden clock continued ticking'. It is interesting that the make of clock was specified. Eliot could just have said 'the clock', but by telling us that it was a rather fancy, porcelain clock he adds to the idea that Aunt Helen was well off and able to surround herself with fine things. A flowery, fussy clock also seems fitting for this 'maiden aunt' who ran a household in which the servants were very careful to behave properly at all times.

The clock also serves to remind us that life goes on. The regular rhythm of the clock is predictable which suggests that Aunt Helen's life was equally predictable. Such a routine existence is also a dull one and it makes Aunt Helen's death seem even sadder as it suggests that she never really got to live life to the full.

There is a sad message at the heart of the poem, however, which is that a person can live their entire life without really touching anyone else so that



even when they die, they are not mourned. The poet says that when Aunt Helen died, there was 'silence at her end of the street'. This could be a mark of respect or it could mean that nobody cared. Even if the silence is respectful, it is only at 'her end of the street', suggesting that Aunt Helen's death didn't affect many people. Her servants, far from feeling any sorrow, seem to be happier when their mistress is dead than they were when she was alive and carry on in a way they would not have dared to do if she were still around. Their introduction to the poem brings a sense of life and movement which is in stark contrast to the detached, emotionless, dry descriptions of Aunt Helen.

Although it is sad to think that someone could die unloved, there is nonetheless some humour in the way this message is presented to us. Serious moments, such as the observation that there was 'silence in heaven' when Aunt Helen died are followed by more ridiculous statements: in this case we are told that there was 'silence at her end of the street' too. The undertaker shows proper respect by wiping his feet but Eliot observes rather mockingly that he was 'aware that this sort of thing had occurred before'. The poem ends on an uplifting, entertaining image of the housemaid and the footman flirting, and the knowledge that this would have appalled Aunt Helen is amusing. There is also a contrast between the sexuality of the couple and the lack of intimacy in the maiden aunt's life.

This is a most unconventional elegy, veering as it does between formality and mockery. The structure is unusual too: it is one line short of a sonnet. The critic George Williamson says that 'Aunt Helen' shows how the stultifying world of Boston 'affronted [Eliot's] sensibilities' and led to his caricaturing the 'genteel tradition' in this and other poems.