Modernist works, such as the poetry of T.S. Eliot, were characterised by an exploration of the fractured existence of humanity and man’s alienation in a hostile universe. Both “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” aim to capture the world of urban life in the 20th century as one devoid of communication and connection. In these poems, Eliot explored the theme of degeneration of society unto one that lacks meaningful communication, which results in social paralysis and the consequent isolation of the individual from society. In “Love Song”, Eliot describes a society dominated by convention that inhibits the formation of relationships, while “Rhapsody” critiques urban squalor as reducing individuals to nothing more than a life of detachment. In exploring these themes, Eliot allows the responder to consider the tension between modern society and the alienation of the individual.
Eliot explores the relationship between individuals and man’s alienation through his presentation of religion, wherein religion serves as a source of salvation apart from the nihilism and hopelessness of Eliot’s generation. Both “The Hollow Men” and “Journey of the Magi” are concerned with reverence and revelation that serves to provide meaning for the individual, allowing them to escape the previous cynicism and sordidness of their world. “The Hollow Men” aims to capture the life of the individual in modern society in terms of the repercussions of Atheism, while “Journey” serves as a metaphoric arabesque for the difficult experiences one must face in a spiritual pursuit of faith. In this way, the responder is invited to contemplate Eliot’s focus on the individual’s experience of religious salvation and the impact of this revelation on their perception of the modern world.
To begin with, in “Love Song”, Eliot illustrates the degeneration of modern society into one that lacks meaningful communication.

- Contrasting to Riquelme’s perspective where “modernism…makes for much more peaceful and productive world”, I believe the poem explores the fragmented nature of the modernist world and its omnipotence on all facets of an individual’s existence.
- Any romantic suggestions of relationships in the title are immediately undercut by the epigraph from Dante’s *Inferno*, wherein the imagery of hell parallels Prufrock’s inner hell of imprisonment in a society that represses genuine expression in lieu of convention.
- Eliot presents the death-in-life landscape of “half deserted streets” and “sawdust restaurants with oyster shells”, discerning behind the stagnant concealment of “fog” a world of confusion and pretence.
Accumulation of “cups, the marmalade, the tea” reduced modern society to a series of inane rituals. The poem points obliquely to the meaningless world of “tea and cakes and ices” and pretentious society: In the room the women come and go, talking of Michelangelo.

The extended metaphor of the cat, typically associated with seclusion, symbolises the breakdown of society into one that prevents significant connection. Alliteration “licked, lingered, let fall” connotes the lugubrious nature of the cat, while the “soot” on its back directly connects its loneliness with its surroundings.

The metonym “prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet”, wherein the face represents the whole self, implies that all association is artificial and thus meaningful communication is impossible in a society dominated by pretence.
• Eliot includes fragments of sonnet form at the conclusion of the poem “Shall I part my hair behind? / Do I dare to eat a peach?, rhymed, as in the conclusion of a Petrarchan sonnet, but with a pessimistic and anti-romantic content. These fragments, coupled with the interjection “I do not think [the mermaids] would sing to me” create a contrast that comments bitterly on the bleakness of modernity.
  o The fragmented style is representative of the broken mentality of the persona as he battles between personal integrity and public image/ the split self of public compliance and private turmoil.
• Eliot’s exploration of this idea as a shared aspect of ordinary human existence, evident in inclusive pronouns “we”, allows the responder to recognise this pessimistic perspective as a characteristic of the modernist context, which was dominated by ideas of disintegration of culture and the incommunicable experience of all people.
Furthermore, Eliot connects this degeneration of society and lack of communication with social paralysis and isolation of the individual from society.

- Eliot’s sordid depiction of the city with “yellow fog” is symbolic of the toxicity of the persona’s context, further exemplifying the dehumanisation that results from the industrialised world. The helplessness of the middle-class “everyman” in the face of the prejudices of a new world is portrayed through the anthropomorphism “pinned and wriggling on the wall”, underlying the disempowerment and vulnerability of the persona, with Eliot reinforcing the adverse repercussions of a modernistic society on the individual’s sense of self.

- Images of paralysis are centrally linked with the way society forces the individual to act according to prescribed codes; the clothes of acceptable middle
class society “My morning coat, collar mounting firmly to the chin” are confining and metaphorically restrict Prufrock to the point of being “fixed”. This paralysis prevents Prufrock from being able to “force the moment to its crisis” and somehow consummate a relationship with a woman. This inability to form relationships perpetuates the isolation of the individual, illustrating the impact of modern society on the alienation of the individual.

• Eliot subverts the expected features of a dramatic monologue, which include an individual and an implied listener, by removing the implied listener and instead focusing on Prufrock’s interiority.
  
  o It is evident that, as Northrop Frye states, while the poem begins with the use of second person “you”, Prufrock is ultimately talking to himself, and “in addressing a ‘you’ is also himself”, Prufrock compounds the division between himself and the world.
• The poem moved from a series of fairly concrete physical settings – a cityscape of “streets” and several interiors – to a series of vague ocean images “seaward on the waves”, conveying Prufrock’s emotional distance from the world as he comes to recognise that “it is impossible to say just what [he means]”.

Likewise, in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night”, Eliot illustrates the deterioration of urban society into one which lacks meaningful connection.

• While “Love Song” reveals the emptiness of middle class conformity, “Rhapsody” is a failed attempt to recover some sort of meaning apart from the banal routines of contemporary existence.

• Eliot’s use of the “city block” as the prime symbol of a decaying modern life throughout his work reflects the common nihilistic attitude that dominated the modernist movement.
• The poem, instead of experiencing the profound emotional enrichment that is often associated with a bond with nature in the “lunar synthesis”, undermines the lyricism of the Romantics by presenting a scenario of despair where even the moon is diseased by a “washed out small pox”.

• Eliot creates a sense of irony in the title “Rhapsody”, which implies a mood of frenzy and vivacity, while notions of decay and aimlessness pervade the setting of the poem.

• Eliot concentrates a number of fragmented images to suggest the sordid nature of a modern city, such as the recurrent “twisted things”, which elucidate Eliot’s preoccupation with the purposelessness and distortion of urban squalor. These fragmented images are in the characteristic style of French symbolist Jules Laforgue, an allusion which is furthered with the combination of
the “madman shakes a dead geranium”, symbolic of the degeneration of society to worthlessness.

• The personified “street lamp”, which provides the only discourse through the poem, demonstrates the lack of communication in this degraded society, while repetition of non-specific sounds “the street lamp sputtered/ the street lamp muttered” illustrates the inefficiency and insignificance of this meagre connection. Intertextuality with “Complainte de Cette Bonne Lune” by Laforgue in “la lune ne garde aucune rancune” compares the amnesiac moon with the “woman” whose “hand twists a paper rose” like a mindless automation. This metaphor connects surroundings to the individual, allowing the responder to recognise the absence of meaningful connection in the degenerate society.

In addition, Eliot explored this theme of a denigrated society devoid of communication as a reason for the
consequent social paralysis and isolation of the individual.

- Eliot uses musical allusions throughout his poems, such as in the title “Rhapsody”, to create tensions between the different elements in his works, such as music and imagery. This tension furthers the meaning of the poem as it conveys to the responder the detachment experienced by the persona within the expectations of modern society.

- The woman who “hesitates” in the doorway, along with the “eyes” that peer through “shutters”, indicate the social paralysis that pervades society as individuals are restricted by normality and unable to initiate relationships.

- The manifestation of the persona’s “memory” and Eliot’s fragmentary style highlights the influence of Bergsonian philosophy, which asserts that consciousness is limited to the effect of the universe of
the individual. This dominance of the external world signifies the persona’s alienation in an urban society that is paralysed by monotony and stagnation.

- The single “toothbrush [hanging] on the wall” illustrates the persona’s solitary existence, while the final line “prepare for life / the last twist of the knife” equates this isolated lifestyle with death, emphasising the agony of estranging routine.

- Eliot subverts the conventional portrayal of children as bright and open, instead referencing a child with “nothing behind [it’s] eye”, suggesting that even children have lost the ability to communicate and allowing the responder to recognise the extent of the isolation of the individual from society.

In addition, in Preludes, Eliot explores the negative ramifications of modernity of the individual.

- While “Love Song” reveals the emptiness of middle class conformity, “Preludes” is a failed attempt
to recover some sort of meaning apart from the banal routines of contemporary existence.

- Eliot’s use of the “city block” as the prime symbol of a decaying modern life throughout his work reflects the common nihilistic attitude that dominated the modernist movement.

- “Preludes” portrays the metaphysical deterioration of the individual through the industrialisation of the modern world. Contrasting to Riquelme’s perspective where “modernism...makes for much more peaceful and productive world”, I think Eliot’s exploration of the nihilistic nature of the individual reiterates the corruptive and destructive aspect of contemporary society.

- The poem’s utilisation of olfactory imagery “smoky burnt out ends” provides a sense of decay and decline to highlight the brevity and pessimism of the future world.
Additionally, Eliot effectively communicates the experiences of misery through the sibilance of “soul stretched”. Further demonstrating the extent of this metaphysical suffering as is has transcended the physical boundaries of the persona. The metaphor “yellow soles of feet...soiled hands” symbolises the persona’s tarnished soul underscoring their isolation and disconnection rom their world.

The responder is able to infer the routine and rhythm of modern life through accumulation “four and five and six o’clock”, while personification “his soul stretched tight against the skies” provide a sense of the pain experienced by the individual in the modern world. The “masquerades” provide a symbol of the falsity that pervades society, while the epiphany of the persona concerning the “sordid images of which her soul was constituted” reveal the meaninglessness of urban life. The dominance of normality in Eliot’s world is emphasised in the repetition of unified actions “ all
the hands that are raising dingy shades”. Eliot subverts our expectations of a fresh morning in “the morning comes to consciousness” with the “faint stale smells of beer”, while the pun “assured of certain certainties” bitterly outlines the lack of uniqueness amongst the whole of society.

Furthermore, Eliot explores this theme of a denigrated society devoid of meaning as a reason for the consequent isolation of the individual.

- The inner sufferings of the individuals are complemented by the portrayal of the context as a decrepit environment, reinforcing the futility of human existence.
- The immorality of modernity and its unfavourable repercussions on society is evidenced though the visual imagery of “sawdust trampled street”.
- Eliot uses musical allusions throughout his poems, such as in the title “Preludes”, to create tensions
between the different elements in his works, such as music and imagery. This tension furthers the meaning of the poem as it conveys to the responder the detachment experienced by the persona within the expectations of modern society.

- The title also implies beginnings, paralysis, cannot initiate relationships.
  - The “lonely cab horse” → isolation.
  - Fragments “feet” “eyes” “hands” imply the lack of completeness and the disconnected nature of urban life, which perpetuates the alienation of the individual.
  - “Evening newspapers” references the routine of reading the paper on public transport (isolated).
  - Eliot’s fragmentary style highlights the influence of Bergsonian philosophy, which asserts that consciousness is limited to the effect of the universe of the individual. This dominance of the external world
signifies the persona’s alienation in an urban society that is paralysed by monotony and stagnation.

- Critic Kathleen O’ Dwyer: the poem “explores the diverse impediments to authenticity and integrity...the absence of connection is palpable in feigned attempts at communication”.

In “The Hollow Men”, Eliot illustrates the deterioration of urban society into one that lacks religious faith and is dominated by ideas of atheism, breeding feelings of inaction and subsequent dissatisfaction in the individual.

- Eliot examines the purposelessness of life in the modern world through the motif of decay “broken stone” “broken column”.

- The poem described the life of the individual in this decrepit world as missing an essential component, evident in fragments “gesture without motion” “shade without colour”.

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• Immediate Intertextuality with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in “Mistah Kurtz – he is dead” presents the responder with concepts of the darkness at the heart of civilised men that dominate Conrad’s work. Eliot explores this darkness through the personas of “hollow men”, whose inaction and passivity results in a life of meaninglessness, and suggests that this deprivation of meaning is the result of a lack of religious development in his post-war context.

• “The Hollow Men” wrestles with the confusion and uncertainty of a life without religious direction according to Eliot’s personal background, having not yet converted to the Anglican Church and recently suffering a nervous breakdown following the breakdown of his marriage.

• Eliot concerns himself with the spiritual vacuity of the modern “city” and the declining importance of religious faith in the life of the urban individual,
evident in indentations of the Lord’s Prayer “for thine is the kingdom” that emphasise the lack of devotion experienced by the modern man.

- This lack of devotion and passivity results in feelings of bleakness and brokenness which pervade Eliot’s modernist vision; as stated by Kathleen O’Dwyer, Eliot describes a world “reflecting the absence of meaning” experienced by the faithless individual.

- This legitimacy of this idea in Eliot’s context is evident in the continual use of allusions to Shakespeare, Guy Fawkes, and Dante’s Inferno, as Eliot’s life without religion perpetuates feelings of uncertainty so overwhelming that he must draw from other artists to validate his ideas.

Additionally, Journey foregrounds man’s struggle to retain his spiritual identity in an age increasingly devoted to the secular world.
• Eliot, according to his modernist context of nihilism and despair, presents a scenarios of humanity’s degenerate condition “cities hostie and the towns unfriendly” in the world; however, Eliot’s personal context of recent conversion to the Anglican Church affords the poem a sense of hope for salvation within the “bitter agony” of reality.
• The significance of theology in the poem can be seen in the reference to Jesus in “an old white horse galloped away”, which serves to impart a religious solemnity to the background of the journey.
• The modern man’s religious struggle is seen throughout the poem, as the journey of the magi parallel’s man’s struggle to find faith within the secularity of life.
• By omitting the 3 gifts from the story of the wise men, Eliot forces the responder to focus on the journey rather than the end product, and hence highlights
man’s continuous journey as he struggles to find faith despite the breakdown of religious values in the modern world.

- Eliot’s use of fragments along with repetition of “and such a long journey/ the ways deep and the weather sharp” is indicative of the difficulties of the quest for faith experienced by the man in the twentieth century. These difficulties come about according to the inhibitions to religious faith presents by the modern world; personification of feelings of doubt “with the voices singing in our ear, saying that this was all folly” allows the responder to recognise the struggle to remain dedicated to religion within the magi’s world of luxury “the summer palaces” and “silken girls”.

- As stated by Nasser Maleki, the poem supports the reality of the fragmented loss and “religious identity” of the modern man who in the modern age “is trapped in a welter” of confusion and uncertainty.