“Our world, and our place in it, is increasingly hard to understand.”
How does Eliot explore the complex place of the individual in the modern world in his poetry? Make reference to *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* and one other poem you have studied.

The modern world at the turn of the 20th century saw many dramatic changes in its landscape, culture and beliefs, creating an increasingly complex world for individuals to find meaning in. Modernist poet T. S Eliot closely examined the horrors of urban decay and monotony modern world, and the resulting complexities surrounding identity, faith, and the search for purpose in an increasingly meaningless world. His early poem *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* examines the inner turmoil of the modern man, suppressed beneath the modern façade. A later work, *The Hollow Men* conducts an in-depth exploration of the loss of spiritual direction, and the poem *Preludes* analyses these impacts on the vacuity of soul (and purpose) as a result of the decaying environment.

In order to establish themselves successfully in a changing society, individuals inherited public personas, instead hiding their own identity, and loosing sense of self and purpose. Lost sense of self and purpose left people making their identities in society, and confused on the protocols of society. The poem *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* exemplifies the taxing effects of suppression of individuality through the internal monologue of a typical modern man. The oppression of society that suffocates Prufrock is made evident in ‘prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet’. The repetition of ‘face’ and ‘meet’ implies the prevalence of self-suffocation in society and the absence of genuine displays of character, illustrating the extent of falsity in society (struggle of search for place?). The persona creates the anxiety that exists behind maintaining this public façade, by using synecdoche in ‘eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase’. By isolating the eyes, Eliot depersonalises the members of society and further illustrates the reduction of identity by fixing people into a predetermined ‘formulated phrase’. Eliot makes evident the growing complexities of fitting oneself into a persona suited for the public eye, and thus loosing oneself in the process. The hopelessness of ever succeeding to confidently establish one’s place and sense of purpose in the modern world is exclaimed by Prufrock in ‘I should have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas’. By using animal imagery and synecdoche of a crab’s claws, Prufrock diminishes his own self-worth in society, defeated by the futility to overcome the oppression of the modern world and engage with his desires, and thus fails to achieve the purpose of his monologue, to court a lady. This failure to express oneself as a result of sacrificing individuality to conformity is expressed in ‘it is impossible to say just what I mean!’ The desperation in the tone gives insight to the detrimental effects of sacrificing individuality for conformity, as real self disappears, and individuals like Prufrock are lost trying to become a manufactured personality. Plagued by anxiety and fear of public shame, Eliot makes clear the complexities of establishing ones place in society, and achieving self and purpose in the 20th century.

The period in the 20th century also involved dramatic shifts in traditional belief systems, and, the erosion of faith and spirituality. T. S Eliot wrote *The Hollow Men* in the midst of the first World War, where brutal horrors of reality caused many to question and abandon belief in a higher power and after life. The complications of abandoning centuries of spiritual tradition is explored by Eliot through the use of a scarecrow metaphor. The ‘hollow men’ are described as ‘stuffed men/Leaning together’ whose voices are as ‘meaningless as wind in
dry grass’. The images of the scarecrows and bodiless wind illustrates how the modern people lack soul or substance, being so weak they cannot stand on their own. The simile of ‘meaningless as wind’ describes their loss of purpose and direction. This shows that the decreasing importance of religion in the modern world lead to individual decay of purpose, and thus individuals struggled to place themselves in an increasingly meaningless world. The final section of the poem epitomizes the resulting futility of man to take action spiritually in a changing world where religion is in decline. Although Robert Crawford states this section’s voices are ‘the most complex’, due to the fragmentation of rhyming couplets and semantic patterning, this style most effectively portrays the futility of the hollow men to place themselves spiritually. The parody of the nursery rhyme that replaces a mulberry bush with a ‘prickly pear’ conveys a dry and desolate landscape, a desert, devoid of life and meaning. This nursery rhyme structure is childish, representing the pointlessness of life without religious direction toward an afterlife, instead filling time with meaningless rhymes instead of purposeful prayer.

The decline of religious importance in the modern world hence left individual’s spiritually lost, without a sense of purpose and struggling to find meaning in a life without an afterlife.

The vacuity of soul and purpose explored above can be further accounted for by the urban decay and monotony induced by the manufacturing industry of the 20th century cities. *Preludes* written by Eliot in 1910* generates the putrid streetscape and the resulting impact on human mentality and emotion that evolves to an ever more complex search for meaning in life. The phrase ‘With all its muddy feet that press/to early coffee stands’ uses synecdoche of muddy feet to remove individuality from the working class, and conveys synchronous daily routine of waiting at for coffee. This exemplifies how the monotonous routine engaged by the masses destroys sense of freedom and individuality. So, although an individual’s place in the modern world is apparently simple due to its unanimity, an individual’s search for purpose and fulfilment in life is increasingly challenging. The monotony of routine is conveyed to be never ending through the subsequent couplet, ‘with all the masquerades/ that time resumes’, that conveys the illusion that time is passing. This notion was possibly inspired by philosopher Henri Bergson who reasoned that the experience of time becomes subjective to the mood and emotions of the person. Therefore, the ennui of monotonous urban routine creates a fallacy of time passing. Participation in the working routine of the urban city couples inherently with dissatisfaction with self and loss of purpose, making the search for meaning in life increasingly complicated.

Trapped under a manufactured façade and stuck in a monotonous routine, sense of self is diminished, and the loss of hope and faith caused loss of a purposeful existence to ward an afterlife. Thus, it became increasingly difficult for individuals to place themselves in complex world devoid of meaning and purpose.
How does Eliot explore the futility of the modern world in his poetry?

Discuss the first 3 stanzas of Hollow Men and at least one other poem you have studied.

The tumultuous period of the early 20th century presented its urban dwellers with many challenges of the decline of religion, monotony of daily life, and the loss of identity in society. Modernist poet T. S Eliot closely examined the horrors of life in the rapidly changing modern world, and explored the futility of the individual to overcome these challenges, instead losing the inherent necessities of a meaningful existence. Thus, existence itself became futile. His poem The Hollow Men examined Nihilism and the failure of man to take action morally and spiritually. His earlier poems, The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock and Rhapsody on a Windy Night explore similar weakness of the human spirit against the oppression of modern society and the inability to act upon one’s own desires.

The period around the First World War saw the erosion of faith and spirituality, as the brutal horrors of reality caused men to abandon traditional beliefs of a higher power. Eliot’s poem The Hollow Men analyses the complications of abandoning centuries of tradition and hope for an afterlife leaves men without a purpose for meaningful existence. The metaphor of a scarecrow is used to describe the men as ‘stuffed men/leaning together’ whose voices are as ‘meaningless as wind in dry grass’. The images of the scarecrow and bodiless wind illustrate how the modern men lack soul or substance, being so weak they cannot stand on their own. The simile of ‘meaningless as wind’ describes their loss of purpose and direction, and their inability to change it. The poems closing stanza uses fractured structure and rhyme pattern to effectively summarise the utter futility of the modern hollow men to redeem themselves in the eyes of god, casting them as lost without purpose toward an afterlife for the rest of their pitiful existence. Alistair Wisker expresses in his analysis of Eliot’s work that initially ‘poetry enters our mind through the eyes’. The fractured stanzas in this last section, such as ‘For Thine is the Kingdom’ margined to the right of the page, are therefore primarily analysed by their fragmented visual structure, which creates the atmosphere of confusion and lack of direction, reflective of the faithless modern souls. Due to this fragmented structure between nursery rhyme and semantic patterning, Robert Crawford describes these voices to be ‘the most complex’ of the poem. It could be said however, that both the visual effect and the meaning behind these complex, fragmented voices most accurately conveys the nature of the hollow men. The parody of the nursery rhyme reverts the hollow men’s existence back to the naivety of childhood, representing the pointlessness of life without faith. Instead, they fill their time with meaningless rhymes instead of purposeful prayer. The fragmentation of the Lord’s prayer in ‘For Thine is/Life is/For Thine is the’ further establishes the weakness to atone for sins and achieve spiritual redemption. The men of modern society have therefore failed, resulting in the apathy to regain sense of purpose and live a fulfilled, meaningful life.

In attempt to be accepted into the increasingly materialistic society conducted by social norms, individuality was sacrificed to fulfil the modern manufactured archetype. In The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock, Eliot investigates the degradation of identity and the anxiety incited in an individual, resulting in a torturous inability to express oneself and (fulfil desire) embrace identity. The persona of the poem establishes the scenery with the simile comparing the sky to ‘a patient etherised upon a table’. Immediately, the concept of helplessness is already conveyed to be an inherent part of Prufrock’s world, and it is likely this is how he views himself in his world; immobile and vulnerable to the horrors of his world. Eliot describes the falsity of society in ‘prepare a face to meet the faces that you
meet’, using the repetition of ‘face’ and ‘meet’ to emphasise that it is only the manufactured facades that are displayed in public. Thus, the depths of ones conscious are never presented publically, as Eliot conveys in the epigraph from Dante’s Inferno. The epigraph describes an inescapable hell, which can similarly describe Prufrock’s conscious, as no one will ever know his supressed personal thoughts and internal suffering. This poem through its form of a dramatic monologue therefore effectively explores the futility of maintaining identity in a superficial society, leaving individuals hollow of meaning, much like explored in The Hollow Men.

Finally, the shifting urban landscape becoming contaminated by pollution and decay from factory work was taxing on the human spirit, resulting in simultaneous decay of sanity. In Rhapsody on a Windy Night, Eliot uses extensive fragmented images of grotesque decay of environment and morality to demonstrate its permeation through memory. Critic Joseph Chiari in ‘T. S Eliot – Poet and Dramatist’ describes the images of each stanza as representing an ‘instinct of survival’, including the cat in the gutter, the ‘automatic’ hand of the child, and a crab gripping on a ‘hacking’ stick. He analyses these images as illustrating that ‘life is purposeless… held together by routine and instinct’. The personas memories of the modern world, therefore, represent the loss of meaning and purpose, resulting in an ultimately futile existence. Mans inability to counter the decay of the human spirit is conveyed through the personification in ‘the street lamp said: Regard’. This is symbolic of the control the built environment holds over man, and their inability to escape the putrid reality of their world. Thus, the pollution of the human spirit decayed sense of meaning, and resulted in the futility to reclaim it.

Modern existence in the urban landscapes of the 20th century became corrupted by Nihilism, public façade and soiled environments, leaving the human soul starved of purpose and identity. Through his poetry, Eliot explores fruitless existence, and the futility of society to escape or recover from the urban wasteland, leading to an utterly futile existence.
Modernism aimed to confront the present rather than to escape from it.
To what extent does this perspective align with your understanding of Eliot’s poetry?

The turn of the 20th century underwent significant shifts in landscape, culture and belief, and along with it the focus of art movements changed as cynical modernism overtook the metaphysical poetry of Romanticism from the Victorian Era. The poetry of T. S Eliot is quintessential of the modernist art movement in that its purpose was to unveil and explore in-depth the horrors faced by the individuals suffering in the modern world. Eliot investigates the effects of the putrid decaying environment on the human spirit in Preludes and The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock, as well as looking at the loss of identity as a sacrifice to the manufactured modern façade, to fit in to the monotonous routine of city life.

Eliot’s poetry does not shy away from the descriptive details of the disgusting polluted city in which he wrote. He frequently engages the audience in landscapes through sensory imagery in Preludes. Olfactory imagery is used in ‘smell of steaks in passageways’, ‘stale smells of beer’ and ‘smoky days’, effectively placing the reader in his polluted environments. The hissing assonance of ‘s’ in the phrases also contributes to the hostile atmosphere, and creates a tone of disgust, reflective of public reaction at that time. The taxing effects of the urban pollution on the human soul/spirit is examined in the metaphor ‘the thousand sordid images/of which your soul was constituted’, conveying how the sordid streetscape has become a part of the person’s identity. The inescapable pollution that plagued every aspect of modern existence is similarly explored in The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock though the personification of the ‘yellow fog’ that is the industrial smog. The city fog ‘licked its tongue into the corners of the evening’ and ‘lingered upon the pools’. The personification illustrates the constant presence of the fog, and how it infiltrates to become a constant past of life. Furthermore, it is not only the pollution but the nature of the physical environment that plagues the population. The simile ‘streets that follow like a tedious argument/with insidious intent’?? gives the environment a sinister quality, establishing the city as untrustworthy and unsafe. Joseph Chiari in ‘T, S Eliot – Poet and Dramatist’ explains that Eliot ‘did not want to write for a large public, he wanted to express the truth as he felt it’. While Eliot did in fact openly express with brutal honesty the squalid streets in which he lived, his poetry gained worldwide recognition for his honest confrontations of the modern tragic reality, and is continually studied through history. It is this authenticity with which Eliot engages with his reality that makes him such a prominent Modernist writer, as he compellingly confronts the issues faced by the inhabitants of his context.

Swallowed by the monotony of urban routine, the modern masses suffered from unfulfilment and the decay of their own individuality and meaning. Society becomes depersonalised in Preludes as Eliot writes ‘all the hand/that are raising dingy shades/in a thousand furnished rooms’. The use of synecdoche isolates the physical participation in routine from personal identity, illustrating this loss as a ‘thousand’ people engage I simultaneous meaningless activity. Consequential of the banal monotony of routine, Eliot illustrates the illusion of time passing in ‘the other masquerades that time resumes’. This metaphor (of the fallacy of time) is likely inspired by Philosopher Henri Bergson, who reasoned that experience of time becomes subjective to mood and emotion of the individual. Thus, the ennui of urban living creates the illusion/fallacy of time passing. Similar images of falsity and its effects on the degradation of identity are creating in The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock. Repetition in ‘prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet’ endorses the reality that individuality is supressed and replaced by public façade and there is no true exposure of self in society. Suffocated by manufactured pose/masquerade and suppressed
by the tedious routine of modern existence, Eliot exposes though his poetry the disintegration of identity and the human spirit.

In exposing the harrowing truths of life in the modern world, Eliot simultaneously explores the futility to contest or escape reality and the resulting absence of meaning or purpose. In stanza 3 of *Preludes*, the voice shifts to second person in ‘you lay upon your bed and waited’. By directly addressing the audience (as well as making them pause at the caesura), Eliot invites the audience to engage in the suffering of the individual. The body positioning is one of vulnerability, thus the audience, now in position of the poems persona, can understand the incapability to fight the forthcoming ‘sordid images’. Although Eliot creates this suffering to be widespread through using the second person, he also creates the isolation experienced by the suffering persona. This is achieved through the personification in ‘as the street hardly understands’, creating the notion that this individual is alone in their inner turmoil. Similarly, in the dramatic monologue of J Alfred Prufrock, Eliot demonstrates modern futility while describing the sky ‘like a patient etherised upon a table’. The simile of the sky being motionless and vulnerable also functions as a metaphor for the human condition, being caught in a state of meaningless existence. To explore the stark realities Eliot confronts in his work, critic Joseph Chiari poses the question ‘what kind of truth has the speaker known?’ and answers it – ‘merely the vacuity and futility of life’. This modern reality is exemplified in ‘I have measure out my life in coffee spoons’, a metaphor which states the absence of meaning in a material world dictated by routine and experience by individuals suffering in isolation, posing manufactured facades to hide the reality of their condition.

T. S Eliot’s depiction of modern reality is one of brutal honesty embracing in full detail the squalid landscape, the monotony of city work, and the resulting deterioration of the human spirit. In confronting the truth, Eliot also exposes man’s futility to escape the tragic realities, thus resulting in the loss of meaningful existence.