“The ideas and techniques of the poetry of T.S. Eliot reflect the perspectives of the Modernists. Examine this statement for at least TWO poems. Include your personal reflections on the poems. (1000 words)

The representation of the modern man through T.S. Eliot’s poetry portrays the sordidness and ugliness of modern city life through an isolated and pusillanimous persona. The pursuit for identity and purpose within a society which is controlled by machinery is a continuous strife for individuals where destruction and urban decay are prevalent. Modernism within poetry encompasses the questioning of representation and stylist fragmentations through a highly ambivalent persona and their relation to society through techniques of interior monologue, stream of consciousness and defamiliarisation. The tensions of modernity and the flaws of humanity expressed in ‘Preludes’ illustrates the dilapidation and degradation of the modern world through a reflective internal monologue by the persona. Similarly, ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ encapsulates the concept of the modern man who is suspended between life and death through the persona’s instability of memory and ironic account of reality. Eliot illustrates the struggle for the individual within a world of routine and sameness.

Through the portrayal of the modern man as an existential flaneur by Eliot reflects the social milieu of the modern world where loss of identity and monotony are prevalent. The pursuit of individuality is absent within the modern world where false pretence and “other masquerades” prevail. The diction and symbolism of “masquerade” represents the loss and hidden identity of the modern man through illusion and façade. This alludes to ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ of “putting on a face to meet the faces we meet” by the upper classes which reinforces the necessity of hiding one’s identity through the need to present a false self. Thus, individuals in the modernist period were bounded by the need to assimilate in society and the expectation to present a façade and as contemporary readers, this need is dissimilar. Similarly, Eliot emphasises humanity as destroyed and contorted through his metaphor of “his soul stretched tight across the skies”. The use of 3rd person masculine can be interpreted as a biblical allusion to God, as “soul stretched tight” representing Jesus on the crucifix using imagery of his body stretched across the wooden cross and “skies” which indicates ascension to heaven and the higher world. Eliot employs this biblical allusion to parallel the persona who feels that he has sacrificed his own soul and life to androgynous and mundane city life, in comparison to Jesus who died to forgive the sins of Christians. Whether the interpretation of the masculine pronoun “He” refers to God, or another entity is contended by Pamela Cohen who perceives that it “is not a man per se but an expression of an idea, from the perspective of Eliot himself”. This interpretation allows for the accountability of Eliot expressing his personal modernists concerns revealed by the adverb “tight” which exposes tension to reveal the heartbroken and omniscient tense. Furthermore, the sibilance of “soul stretched” emphasises the elongated and strained soul the persona through the stressed constants which create an unsettling tone. This reinforces the struggle and pain of the persona due to the mundane and monotonous nature of modern city life. Thus, Eliot captures the struggles of the modern man who is bounded by the struggle to conform to a society where sameness and a lack of identity dominate.

The depiction of modern society and disorientated individuals by Eliot reveals the perspectives of modernists who are trapped in the cyclical nature of life and bounded by the
illusion of time and routine. The ghastly imagery within ‘Rhapsody On a Windy Night’ of “And old crab with barnacles on his back” symbolises the individuals within the modern world who are bounded to conform to society’s expectations. Eliot’s use of the crab as an objective correlate as a metaphor of humanity being oppressed in the modern world accentuates the struggle and insecurity of the persona. This imagery is similar to that in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ where “ragged claws” are a symbol of the Prufrock’s imagination that has taken over his mind. The crab as an icon of modern identity, living on the slums, reduces humanity to a scuttling creature through avant garde imagery which creates a complex and ambiguous meaning about identity. Similarly, “The last twist of the knife” epitomises the persona’s realisation that there is no hope through the emotive connotations and violent image of the agony of living a monotonous, half lived life. Thus, highlighting the contorted, lost individual of the modern world who is unable to escape the cyclical nature of the nature of the routine of life. Life is living death for the modern man with no identity, and contemporary readers are able to observe the struggles and alienation of individuals within modern society where there is a lack of community and identity. Furthermore, typically children are portrayed in fiction with bright, eager eyes as they are naïve and open to all, but when the persona remembers a child, he “could see nothing behind that child’s eye.” This is perhaps Eliot’s greatest indictment of society, to suggest that even the children can no longer communicate. Axel Kruse interprets the “bizarre dreamlike imagery” as “programmatic development of distinctive kind of imagery … that creates complex and ambiguous meaning about modern identity”, thus suggesting that Eliot’s use of imagery is open to interpretation for contemporary readers. In addition, through the use of fragmented and broken images, Eliot suggests the sordid life and squalor of the modern city. The diction of “automatic” further reinforces the idea of the children as soulless and of mechanical movement without thought, which emphasises the industrialised, machine aspect of the modern world. Eliot portrays this image of electronic and mechanical behaviour to reveal that as individuals, we accept and interpret our memories by instinct, layered with the sequence of behaviour long ingrained into our psyches. As contemporary readers, the issues presented by Eliot are still relevant as we are also trapped within the world of routine and the cyclical nature of life.

Eliot explores and epitomises the struggles of the individual in the modern industrialised world through his Modernist perspective. Both ‘Preludes’ and ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ emphasise the concerns of Modernists of a lack of identity and individuality within an industrialised society are expressed through Eliot’s effective use of language and form.