

MODULE B – T.S. ELIOT

PRELUDES

1. T.S. Eliot's 'Preludes' is redolent of the ontological, existential crisis described by modernists, especially Eliot himself. The alienated Image associated with the simile "...like ancient women gathering fuel in vacant lots" sums up Eliot's zeitgeist of a soul-less society, deprived of the ability to find spirituality within. The repetition of the word "vacant", in the first and last stanzas, with its connotations of nihilistic isolation and desolation, provides an ambiguous framework to the poem as a whole. The accumulation of negative adjectives, "broken... lonely" foreshadows Eliot's vision of individuals devoid of hope, love or spirituality, struggling in a denatured urban milieu, "The thousand sordid images/ Of which your soul is constituted". He examines, through a modernist lens, the sensibilities of society within an urban environment and finds them wanting, being merely grossly physical, "Wipe your hand across your mouth and laugh." The repetition in "the notion of some infinitely gentle/ infinitely suffering thing" becomes a brief contrapuntal intrusion of hope and spirituality, which breaks the pattern of bleak weltanschauung that underpins the rest of the poem. However, entropy reasserts itself and the cycle of despair is reaffirmed as "The worlds revolve like ancient women" using a striking simile to remind us of the inevitability of modernist ennui. It is a vision of an atomised world that offers little hope of redemption.
2. A clear level of fatalism and futility is presented within Eliot's adaption of his human condition. In 'Preludes', the sordid, futile olfactory image "the smell of steaks in passageways" symbolises the polluted and mundane environment that individuals are forced to endure. Eliot explores the nature of an alienated life in urban society "you dozed, and watched the night revealing/ The thousand sordid images/ Of which your soul was constituted" justifying how the urban environment has contributed to a fragmented human condition. Eliot creates sordid images of the urban environment to depict the meaningless feelings of individuals as each individual was just one of "a thousand furnished rooms", Stressing the ephemerality of urban life, and contributing to isolation within an urbanised milieu. Eliot suggests that a possibility of escaping this alienation within the bleak environment was to employ "...other masquerades..." to depict false pretences and artificialities, and thereby concealing their true selves behind masks of deceit. Eliot as a result, uses this poem, as an addition to his other poems, to outline the toxicity experienced by industrialisation within the modern world.

LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

1. Alienation and isolation within the modern, industrialised world was inescapable within the modernist zeitgeist, and therefore made one's ontological search increasingly hard to understand. Eliot's poem of unrequited love "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is redolent of this isolation experienced within a rapidly changing world, where the speaker ironically confronts how the rapid developments of the modernist context, which facilitated societal integration, contributed to individual alienation. The smooth, iambic pentameter in the first two lines interrupted by the ominous simile "like a patient etherised upon a table" establishes a fragmented tone, redolent of the contextual tension and suggested a suspension on Romantic tradition, however creates a nihilistic sense, that the replacement to this suspension was neglected, and the modernist world must face the industrialised world, characterised by emptiness and alienation. From this first, macabre image, the rest of the stanza follows suit, with undesirable images describing the period of urbanisation "restless nights in one-night cheap hotels / and sawdust restaurants with oyster shells", "streets that follow like a tedious argument". These pessimistic images are accumulative in nature, and therefore contribute to the entire poem's sense of alienation and desolation, and are reflective of the industrialisation that us as responders can infer to be poison to the modern world through Eliot's disposition of a similar nature. Eliot's own personal alienation is highlighted further down the poem when he suggests he "should have been a pair of ragged claws/ scuttling across the floors of silent seas." By extreme, exaggerated measures of self-deprecation, the speaker suggests he should have been merely just a part of a crab, being a bottom feeder. Eliot insinuates by this zoomorphic imagery, that the urbanised world has worsened the societal milieu, and that he wishes he were free from the burdens of consciousness and volition. The poem therefore implicitly promotes the zeitgeist of the modernist world, emphasising the struggle to understand existential meaning.
2. Confronting the liminal space that provided the ambiguous framework to the modern world became a key aspect of modernist thinking. Eliot's dramatic monologue "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" confronts this liminal space, whether it is heaven and hell, death and life, or the conscious and subconscious. The epigraph of Dante's "Inferno" is redolent of this liminal setting, where Dante is in hell himself, pondering the sensibilities between life and the unknown. The words "*Ma perciocchè giammai di questo fondo*" translate to be "but since no man has ever come alive" where Dante accepts he may never leave hell as a result of his sins, and therefore reflect this modernist notion of acquiesce and confrontation into a gloomy pit of nothingness, rather than attempting to escape from the inevitable. Eliot's lyrical repetition "and indeed there will be time... there will be time, there will be time" is emblematic of the speaker's confrontation of the liminal space. Here, Eliot is examining the means of procrastination and is, although not in the future, speculating on the discourse the future will take, placing himself on a threshold between the present and the future. Eliot continues on this liminal pathway by contradicting binary opposites "and time yet for a hundred indecisions/ and for a hundred visions and revisions" which add to the nihilistic tone Eliot creates throughout his poems. It suggests that the acceptance of the ambiguity of the liminal space is necessary in order to find existential meaning, emblematic of the modernist zeitgeist.

RHAPSODY ON A WINDY NIGHT

1. Eliot's theory of time and its forced interaction human memory portrays his modernist, ontological challenge which forces him to confront the underlying meaninglessness of life. His poem "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" echoes the structures developed by philosopher Henry Bergson, in particular the objective correlative, suggesting that how we are determines how we see. Eliot uses Bergson's objective correlative to speculate the reasonings behind our place in the world. The repeated images of personified "street lamps" become a motif for the transcendence of time within a context of eternal ennui, and plays a key role in depicting Eliot's incomprehensibly despondent and fragmented perception of the **sensibilities** of the human condition. These "street lamps sputtered" and therefore unable to speak, portrayed by the sibilance and harsh consonant sounds that creates an enervated and lifeless atmosphere and alludes to the lack of communication and understanding of individual purpose within society. This death-like atmosphere and bleak tone portrayed by the sinister and threatening street lamps compares with the first line of stanza one "twelve o'clock" with its notions of desolation and isolation, emphasised through the harsh tone of the tri-sibylic phrase and the assertive punctuation, emblematic of the industrialised world at midnight. The rest of the poem follows suit "Half-past one", "Half past two", "Half past three", finishing at "four o'clock", interlinking with the transcending motif of the personified "street lamps", that are perhaps constructs of human memory as a whole. As the "lamps" are inanimate objects and are linked to human memory, Eliot suggests that memory is in a way dead, as a result of the process of industrialisation and urbanisation within the modernist period. These notions mirror Bergson's objective correlative, which is, what Eliot himself states "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion". It is in this way that Eliot merges time and memory, to mimic Bergson's objective correlative, to convey the individual struggle within the modernist, industrialised world, to understand the purpose and meaning of life itself.
2. Texts of the modernist era are seen to confront the ambiguous, liminal context that focused on individual place in a soul-less, secular society. The title of his poem "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" sparks Eliot's internal debate of existence, with the irony of a "rhapsody" with meanings of an unstructured, enthusiastic song contradicting with the contents of the poem, which is dominated by sterile, desolate images of isolation and despair. The fragmentation created by this juxtaposition, is redolent of Eliot's modernist lens on society, as Barry Spurr suggests, "Eliot is a poet who evokes the nihilism of modern lives". Complex imagery in stanza three enables Eliot to further his exploration of the desolation that plagues modernist society, with "a broken spring in a factory yard,/ Rust that clings to the form that strength has left" depicting negative images of emptiness, reflecting Eliot's entrapment in his own spiritual and emotional void in his personal quest for individual meaning. In this void, Eliot suggests that the answer to our existential crisis is no answer, as the industrialised society is based off of an ambiguous framework, dogged by false promises. Ambiguity is seen to be a prominent focus throughout Rhapsody, as especially seen in the slightly off-beat iambic pentameter, interrupted with harsh, monosyllabic phrases, as seen in the third stanza "stiff and white." This random structure is again inherent of Eliot's nihilistic view on his urbanised context, as he suggests the secularity of society means that emptiness is inevitable in understanding our place in society.

tsfx



THE HOLLOW MEN

1. Struggles with inner emotional degradation are often characteristic of individuals experiencing physical decay of their surroundings. This is present in Eliot's poem The Hollow Men, written post WWI, in the obvious themes of deterioration and loss of hope, a result of the context and overall consensus of society during that time. The 'paralysed force' of society, represents the citizens overcome with grief of the casualty of war, reinforcing the deterioration of the moral fabric of civilisation. The majority identified as 'hollow' and 'stuffed', the repetition of the collective profound of 'we', illustrating the mass of this theme. The lack of hope and implication of pessimism is highlighted in the 'fired voices' of individuals, cracked and drained of any life, whispering to stay alive. The continuity of inclusive pronouns such as 'we', 'our' and 'they' represent the connectedness of society, finding comfort in each others unfortunate circumstances. This connectedness contributes to the enduring value of the poetry in that society constantly strives to conform to the mass opinion of civilisation, grieving as one better than grieving alone.
2. Hardship and suffering are eternal concepts that can be delineated in the deterioration of a person's sense of identity and individuality, presenting a lack of positivity in their outlook on the future. The Hollow Men was written by Eliot post World War I, revealing the inner and outer anguish of citizens following its demise. Through Eliot's use of the universal pronoun of 'we' in the first lines of the poem, the responder can immediately relate to the feelings of being 'hollow' and 'stuffed' and reflect on their own times of despair. The Epigraph 'Mistah Kurtz, he dead' ? is an allusion to 'Conrad's Heart of Darkness', a text that deeply influenced Eliot's writing in terms of its philosophical resonance with him. It is another metaphor for the loss of society post world war, in the form that individuals became informally adjusted to the grief of losing their loved ones, it became a social norm, setting a somber tone for the remainder of the poem. A second allusion in the poem is to that of 'Guy Fawkes' in 'A Penny for the Old Guy', referring to the celebration in England where young children collect money to purchase various items to stuff an empty body to burn in the memory of Guy Fawkes. This represents societies desperation to fill themselves with something, an emotion, a thought, or possibly just a form of food in the efforts to survive during the economic depression. This presents an enduring concept of those who struggle during economic hardship to form their own opinion of a lifestyle, resulting in a lack of individuality, loss of aspiration, and the feeling of being 'stuffed' with what the remainder of society are holding on to.

JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

1. Eliot's monologue 'Journey of the Magi', 1927, recreates the memories of a Magus who sought out the newborn Christ, and alludes directly to Matthew's version of events. It marks a change in Eliot's spiritual convictions and his conversion to the Church of England two months before he released the poem. The first five lines are adapted from Bishop Andrews Christmas sermon preached in 1622, "a cold coming we had of it" and highlights the hardships of the journey itself recalling in vivid visual imagery, "the camels galled, sore footed", "the night fire going out and the lack of shelter". Eliot repeated use of images of cold and decay reflects an underlying sense of a world which is passing away, further suggested by the Magus mourning of "summer palaces....the terraces....(and) the silken girls bringing sherbet," and the demise of a culture. As in much of his poetry, the urban is "unfriendly" and characterised corrupt "charging high prices" and a dangerous place to sleep, "we preferred to travel all night".
2. In the second stanza the hostile cityscapes gives way at last to a more hospitable landscape with "vegetation" and freshwater of light and the "water mill beating the darkness" alluding to John's claim that Jesus would be the metaphorical light of the world. Whilst some critics have suggested that the "white horse" announces the coming of the Messiah and having given the message gallops away, in light of the mood of most of Eliot's poetry it seems more likely that it is the white horse symbolising goodness of Revelations. The fact that it "galloped away" seems to foreshadow an end of righteousness, confirmed by visual image of the "three trees on the low sky" prefiguring the crucifixion. The disembodied "hands...dicing for pieces of silver" is also a biblical allusion to the Romans who diced for Jesus' robe and the coin paid to Judas for his betrayal; In the final stanza the Magus struggles with the paradox that Christ was born to die. Like Prufrock, the persona feels alienated from his own world and "with an alien people clutching their gods", ironically suggesting that the birth of Christ has also marked the death of his own culture. As a result, he seems as Grover Smith suggests, "content to submit to "another death" for his final deliverance from the world of old desires and gods". Eliot's poem reveals how loss of meaning in human existence creates a moral wasteland in which a universal plan is difficult to ascertain.