Prufrock:

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” represents the experience of alienation within a modern, industrialised society, illustrating the consequent personal despair that is evoked by a profound isolation. Eliot utilizes imagery to presents to readers an urban landscape of “half-deserted streets,” which serves to introduce Eliot’s perception of modernity as a mundane ‘wasteland’. The dramatic monologue form can function as symbolic of an address to Prufrock’s inner self, exposing the duality between the socially prescribed identity and the yearning of the inner self. The process of Prufrock’s emotional and moral decay is evident in the poem’s structure. The opening stanzas are of length and often digress, representing Prufrock’s dithering personality, while the ending stanzas are short and vague, representing his lack of energy and unwillingness to continue. The characterization of Prufrock comments on humanity’s growing detachment from the world, also symbolizing romanticism’s phase into modernism. This is further pronounced with the interjection of rhyming couplets and tercets “In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo”, which prove setting for the poem, a reminder of Prufrock’s disengagement. Eliot also uses synecdoche to represent characters as individual parts, rather than whole (“prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet”) to express their detachment of mind and body. Prufrock’s insecurities are disclosed in the tension between his insistent questions: “Do I dare / Disturb the universe?” which hold out the promise of a more fulfilling personal existence. The evasive temporal repetition, ‘there will be time’, that signals his doubts, hesitation and fears over challenging the social codes of his milieu. This apprehension reveals his feelings of insignificance and vulnerability which are highlighted in the poem by the parenthetical prosopopoeia, “(They will say: How his hair is growing thin!)” The fear of such humiliation, reflects the oppressive social expectations and values of his world which mock his physical appearance, rather than recognise any personal qualities or spiritual aspirations. Prufrock accepts the emptiness of a life where ‘human voices wake us’ from personal dreams ‘and we drown.’ the inclusive plural pronoun giving his experience a timeless universality. Thus, Prufrock’s fears of the social constructs and conventions of his world condemn him to a life devoid of personal richness and robbed of passion.
Preludes:

Eliot’s free verse lyrical poem, “Preludes” interrogates the assumed benefits of modernity by highlighting the physical and spiritual decay of the individual that takes place in an urban, industrialised society. The poem is structured in fragmented vignettes from a 24 hour city routine, creating a disconnected and monotonous atmosphere reflective of urban life, separated into four irregular stanzas, each provides a vignette of humanity within the newly formed city. Eliot depicts modernity as a destructive force which induced modern social degradation and urban alienation. The opening personification of “the winter evening settling down / With smells of steaks in passageways,” a sibilantly sinister, onomatopoeic representation of sordid urban poverty, utilises olfactory imagery to subvert the classically beautiful Romantic evening, establishing modernity as a vindictive force instead of a social asset. This notion is enhanced by the zoomorphic allegory of the working-class community through the metaphor of the horse, “A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps”, evoking connotations of oppression and isolation from the immediate urban environment, which is symbolic of the impersonal urban lives of the workers, as contextually the early 20th century was a transitional period with the mass-production of motor vehicles. Eliot’s overlays a cynicism and pessimism of his era, both academically and in the broader society. His focus on the masks of people within society continues his critique of the dual nature of humanity “With other masquerades that time resumes, one thinks of the hands that are raising dingy shades in a thousand furnished rooms”, concentrated the reader on the projection that times can change but can’t deny the dulling and dirty reality. Eliot presents us with an aggregation of negative urban images, “burnt out…grimy scraps…muddy feet,” which reflect the disintegration of the modern world. The ending of Preludes focuses on an image of cynical acceptance and survival, “Wipe your hang across your mouth, and laugh; The worlds revolve like ancient women gathering in fuel in vacant lots”, the persona’s accepting the futility of life and an inability to halt time or the progress towards this state.
Rhapsody on a Windy Night:

“Rhapsody” portrays a sense of moral nihilism through Eliot’s subversion of literary symbols, pointing to stagnation and a decline in traditional values within the cityscape. The temporal shifts create structure for the poem, building momentum, with the reader dancing through the time-ordered memories, in contrast with the title “Rhapsody” suggesting spontaneity but despite the free verse and irregular rhyme scheme the poem is strictly structured chronologically. The definitions of time create a sense of order and disconnection from the emotive side of the poem associated with romanticism. The protagonist is walking alone on a street totally neglected from society. The dichotomy of natural light of moon and artificial light from the streetlamp represent the contrast between romanticism and modernism. The symbol of the streetlamp is representative of the rise of urbanisation and thus decline in traditional values. In the poem, the streetlamp is the only speaker, this emphasises the inability of the protagonist to communicate and connect with human society. The protagonist’s only “communication” is with a crab in the pool, “An old crab with barnacles on his back/Gripped the end of a stick which I held him.”, and even then, the communication is only at “an arm’s length”. In this phrase, the crab symbolises solitude, and the inability to “move forward” but only sideways. Rhapsody” utilises the motif of a fragmented memory to symbolise the fractured psyche of the modern individual, the opening personification: “Midnight shakes the memory/As a madman shakes a geranium” dramatically expresses the mental fragility arising from life in the bleak setting of a decaying modern urban environment that offers no hope of spiritual fulfilment.
The Hollow Men:

“The Hollow Men” examines the effects of personal alienation, demonstrating how a morally ambiguous and vacuous society establishes social paralysis and inaction, ultimately resulting in one’s alienation and isolation. Eliot’s episodic free verse poem is a response to the trauma of WWI conflict, voicing the experience of crisis for the ‘lost generation of young men and women. Eliot establishes an extended metaphor of scarecrows, “We are the hollow men/ We are stuffed men”, to allude to the spiritual emptiness that marks the social climate post war. The paradoxical juxtaposition of “Hollow” and “stuffed” illuminates his perception of the insignificance of human experience. Employing a dramatic monologue, Eliot alludes to Conrad’s novel Heart of Darkness, in the preface, “Mistah Kurtz –eh dead”, pointing to Conrad’s view of humanity as “hollow to the core”, establishing a personal connection between reader and the persona’s plight. The notion underpins the loss of identity and humanity in Eliot’s exploration of modernity, a loss evident in the anti-pastoralist imagery, “wind in dry grass”, coupled with the anaphoric antithesis, “shape without form, shade without colour”, enunciating the sense of paralysis that marks the speaker’s experience. This is extended in the synecdoche, “there are no eyes here”, where the eyes represent the human soul, depicted as disintegrating in the following metaphor, “in this valley of dying stars”. The poetic symbolism re-enacts a Baudelairian loss of faith in humanity. Indeed, the biblical allusion in, “form prayers to broken stone”, perpetuates this notion of a loss of faith, and suggests a deeper disintegration within the foundations of society since religion ceases to act as a salvation, leaving humanity bereft of any form of meaning. This disintegration is reflected in the fragmented rhythm of the poem, pointing towards a loss of meaning, and delineating modernity’s experience of isolation.
The Journey of The Magi:

Eliot’s ‘The Journey of the Magi’ contributes to representations of personal alienation, represents modernity’s conflict between cultural expectations and beliefs, catalyzing an isolating experience. The chronological structure of the poem, shown by anaphora of ‘then’, in the form of a dramatic monologue using informal syntax, “it was (you might say) satisfactory” to connect with the responder. The narration of the painful journey toward faith through the voice of the Magus, is inspired by the gospel account of the wise men and their journey to Palestine. Symbolic of Eliot’s own conversion to Christianity, the process of decline is evident in the structure of “The Journey of the Magi”, as a sense of decay does not arise until the final stanza. Eliot establishes this through the use of the metaphor in “with the voices singing in our ears, saying that this was a follow” underlining the tension in society, where their consistent critique impacts upon individual’s self-identity. O’Dwyer’s claim of dissolution is reiterated in the rhetorical question coupled with the binary opposite “birth or death? There was a birth, certainly”, highlighting the incongruity between birth of Christ and the death of the persona. Eliot establishes that the expectations from the Magi’s previous religion are transcendent as the Magi view their “alien people clutching their gods” conveying the constraints placed upon individuals as they reconfigure religious beliefs. Within the final stanza, Eliot conveys his consistent stance that the modern man leads a life devoid of any significance, through the binary opposites in “I had seen birth and death,/But had thought they were different.”, depicting a decaying humanity in which birth is of no greater importance than death. Therefore, Eliot reminds readers of the futility of humane existence and the paradoxical salvation that can only be achieved through death.