

Discuss how significant thematic concerns are developed through allusion in TS Eliot's poems. In your response, make detailed reference to *Journey of the Magi* and at least ONE other poem set for study.

The universal struggles for spiritual certainty and grappling with existential isolation are both significant thematic concerns explored through Eliot's use of allusion and repeating refrains in his poetry. His post-WWI lyrical poem The Hollow Men ('Hollow') illuminates the modernist struggle to find spiritual certainty and the anxiety of existential isolation in response to the mechanised post-war world. Journey of the Magi ('Magi'), Eliot's seminal post-conversion piece, draws on the same themes as Hollow, in light of Eliot's paradoxical heightened uncertainty post-conversion. The preoccupation with universal humanist concerns allows for an appreciation of the enduring nature of Eliot's poetry.

In Hollow, a sense of profound anxiety over spirituality is conveyed in the mosaic of allusion to other texts and its own refrains to create a sense of non-linearity and anxiety. Drawing on Conrad's Heart of Darkness in the allusion "Mistah Kurtz – he dead" enables Eliot to evoke an immediate understanding of the 'heart of darkness' that lies at the centre of all moral and emotional experience and an uncertainty that the human spirit is deserving of salvation in a morally chaotic world. The metonymy of "eyes I dare not meet in dreams" lends itself to this thematic concern, as the persona does not have the resolution to meet the "eyes" of the void of human spirituality that exists in the traumatised modernist psyche. In his allusion to Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, "lips that would kiss," Eliot evokes a sense of incompleteness in the human emotional and spiritual experience and thus relaying the uncertainty of spiritual meaning. Furthermore, Hollow elucidates the modernist struggle to come to terms with existential isolation, as illuminated by allusion and illusion in the poem. The romantic motif of the "dying/fading" star alludes to preceding romantic poetry, but instead of offering solace, evokes an image of a distant celestial body doomed to die in isolation and is reflective of the modernist experience. The persona speaks of a "beach on the tumid river," alluding to the Greek mythological River Styx, on which they are trapped and unable to return to humanity or cross over to death, a desolate image of isolation. Finally, in the search for existential solace the persona turn to God, but is unable to finish their prayer in the aposiopesis "For thine

is / life is / for thine is the,” solidifying the sense of futility in searching for meaning and solace in the modern world.

An appreciation of Eliot’s textual integrity is gained when considering the consistency of the significant thematic concerns and poetic techniques in Eliot’s poetry. In Magi, despite the personal addition of faith in a higher power in Eliot’s life, the same sense of spiritual uncertainty is conveyed in the retelling of the birth of Christ. Eliot alludes to the Andrewes 1622 nativity sermon in “a cold coming we had of it” to evoke an understanding of the difficulty of the allegorical physical journey of the Magi for a spiritual and religious journey. The Magus then alludes to this again in “a hard coming we had of it” to exaggerate this sense of uncertainty. Eliot further anachronistically alludes to the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ in “three trees hanging on the low sky” and “hands... dicing for pieces of silver,” highlighting the ultimate futility of the Magi’s quest, and thus the uncertainty in its endeavour. In keeping with his thematic concerns, Eliot relays a message that religion offers no more solace than being belief-less does in a modern world. The negative connotations of “cities dirty” and “towns unfriendly” is reflective of the sordid modernity and chaos that characterises existence. The impact of religion is seen to be more existentially isolating on the Magi as they are no longer at ease in the “old dispensation” and are even further from humanity in the primitive imagery of “an alien people clutching their gods.” Eliot conveys this sense of existential isolation in the final wish of the Magus “I should be glad of another death,” to complement the death of their religious and cultural beliefs with the birth of Christ and the destruction of their last connection to humanity.

The universal thematic concerns consistently portrayed throughout Eliot’s work, enabled by the allusion to external and internal meaning and the projection of modernist concerns, contributes to a deeper appreciation of the enduring relevance of TS Eliot’s suite of poems.