Identity is defined just as much by personal beliefs as it is by social influences. Individuals view themselves based on their memories, emotions, and desires, but these concepts need to be publicly expressible for one to form an identity; it is how we compare and contrast with other individuals, both in their eyes and ours, which gives identity a purpose. Archibald Lampman’s “The City of the End of Things” and T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” both describe a hellish situation where personal identity is unacknowledged. The difference is that, in “The City of the End of Things”, social influences have stripped away identity by turning it into a purely public construct, and in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, Prufrock creates his own hell by not allowing himself to have personal interaction, perceiving himself as being an object, and not forming a tangible personal identity. Despite these differences, both poems portray a life of suffering in its characters by not allowing them to express a privately derived identity in public scenarios, suggesting that a personal identity needs to be a product of private forces and also be publicly expressible for a comfortable state of existence in the individual.

When the identity of different individuals becomes indistinguishable it can lead to an uncomfortable state of existence, which is characterized by the masses in Lampman’s “The City of the End of Things” and their outwardly identical appearances. The
conformity expressed with their “gigantic harmony” (20) of “measured roar and iron ring” (23) works at stripping any distinguishing features from the individual. The identity of the masses is left wholly to public influence, when the typically public day routine overlaps with the private night of the masses. We are shown this when their laborious routines “Cease not, and change not, night nor day” (28). Any emotions they wish to express are also subject to a group generalization. The masses are referred to collectively, and it is said that the sounds they make are “re-echoing” (21) and their cries “monotonous” (36), suggesting that the extent to which an individual person in the masses can express him or herself is too generic to stand out. The portrayal of the masses as unindividualized beings is strengthened by their more machine-than-human appearance, which dehumanizes them into little more than an object. Indeed, it is a city where “no man is” (25), and it is full of “inhuman music” (24), made by beings who “are not flesh, … are not bone, / [and] see not with the human eye” (33-34). Yet, at the same time, they are given the outward appearance of living beings to some extent; they have “clanking hands” (31), “iron lips” (34) and, although they may not see with the human eye, it is implied that they do have eyes. We also know that at one point they must have been human; they are the laborers in a city of “iron towers” (9), “murky streets” (11), and “city gate[s]” (57) – inventions of the human hand and mind. This portrayal of inhuman beings with features analogous to humans, all contained in a distinctly human environment leads one to believe that they have somehow been degenerated from a formerly human state. In essence, because they do not have distinguishable identities, they are seen as something less than human; they are the proletariats, they are gooks, they are bar codes. It is ultimately the dehumanizing process experienced by the masses that
becomes the main perpetuating force in maintaining Lampman’s city as a hell on earth. It is implied, through the laborious nature of their routines, that they are the ones who fuel the flames that burn “terrible and bright” (12) in “a thousand furnace doors” (16), and the closest thing that the city gets to an air of vitality is the “monotonous [cries]” (36) of the masses echoing throughout.

Mass generalization is only one of the identity issues that turn an individual's world into a hellish state; identity can also become a problem in the distinct individual, which is exemplified when the idols in Lampman’s “The City of the End of Things” lose control over how they are seen and have their identities turned into constructs purely derived from public perception. They have been set in an iron tower, far above the city, away from everyone except the other idols. But they must be recognized as existing, or they could not have the status of being an idol. This recognition works at stripping their identity, because it turns the identity into a notion that is totally derived from public perception – an idol. The idols may very well have their own perception of themselves, but any public expression of it is overshadowed by the way others see them. It is hard to believe that the average Canadian could, when seeing the Prime Minister out at the streets, treat him as Mr. Jean Chretien rather than as the Prime Minister. If the power of social status is strong enough, it can effectively prevent (or at least hinder) personality from influencing how one is viewed. Of course, this alone cannot strip an individual of their identity; it is conceivable that the individual’s peers can recognize his or her personality and a component of the individual’s identity. But, for Lampman’s idols, even this possibility of personal expression is nullified with their “incommunicable skill” (68). Being “set… face to face” (55) and prevented from communicating with each other
heightens the strength of the barrier that lack of communication poses for expressing identity between the three idols. And, like the masses, the idols’ identities confine them to their hellish world. They are “set like carved idols” (55) in an iron tower, which is a “fortress and prison of [their] own beliefs” (Early, 100). Or, more specifically to this case, their manifested beliefs: the city that the idols’ “prodigious race” (53) envisioned and made. Since they fail to change their personal beliefs, they cannot even begin to be more or less than what are seen as by the masses. Combined with the presumed traits that come with being an idol, they cannot truly deal with the hellish world imposed on them by their inability to express identity and be noticed for their personal attributes. Their anchoring in the tower then becomes a symbol of the idols’ inability to change, which results from the ability of their segregation to allow massive opinion to contradict and override any change in identity the idols may attempt to elicit in their selves as well as the self-confinement the idols impose on themselves with their unwavering beliefs, leaving them in their isolated and incommunicable hell.

Identity lost by being devoid of any memories, emotions, or desires – the building blocks of how we define ourselves – is another instance that leaves the individual stranded in a hellish world. This is the situation that Lampman’s Idiot is in. It becomes clear that the Idiot is little more than an “empty nut” (44); he lacks all physical and mental abilities, which is summarized in lines 62 to 65: he is “a bulk that never moves a jot, / In his pale body dwells no more, / Or mind or soul, -- an Idiot!” With the Idiot’s “[threads] of memory snapt and cut” (42) he lacks the ability to even begin forming an identity. He is not even granted the identity of what other people make of him; not quite receiving the recognition of an idol, he is merely a carved statue. Fittingly, he stands at
the gates as a message to all who approach. Like a ceremonial guard dressed in full plume at a castle gate, his appearance portrays the most extreme possibilities that the city has within.

Lampman’s poem does not directly imply that, even though the idols and idiot are living in a hellish world, they are suffering. However, when we view the analogous situation of J. Alfred Prufrock, it becomes apparent that they suffer in a similar way as he, since they experience similar problems with their identities. Prufrock, like the idols and idiot, is refrained from expressing his own personal identity. But there is a slight difference, in that Lampman’s characters have their identities repressed by public influence and J. Alfred Prufrock imposes barriers of interaction upon himself. But, regardless of the method, the final effect is the same: the inexpressibility of identity.

Prufrock’s fundamental problem with identity is that he has problems forming one. Levy (1994) has a couple important things to say about this problem. First off, Prufrock defines himself “not by who he is, but by who he is not; he is not Prince Hamlet, he is not the one to whom the mermaids sing, he is not Lazarus risen from the dead”, which prevents him from even beginning to form a real identity. Another thing Levy points out is “[Prufrock] gains his identity from fantasies about real life, not from real life itself.” Since the only gains a sense of self in a context where it cannot be expressed to other individuals, it really has no influence on how people view him.

Prufrock’s fly on the wall behavior is one of the main forces that prevent him from forming an identity. Instead of interacting with women, he sees them “come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (13-14), which is acknowledged a second time in lines 35-36. Likewise, he speaks of having “known the arms already, known them all” (62).
Unarguably, he may know the arms, but do they know him? Instead of following up with an intimate embrace as is suggested by knowing arms, Prufrock comments that they are “braceleted and white and bare / [But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]” (63-64), which suggests a knowing in the sense of remembering rather than interaction with the arms. The point that Prufrock has no social interaction is also enforced when he claims to “know the voices dying with a dying fall / Beneath the music from a farther room” (52-53). Again, he may know and recognize the voices, but there are no signs that interaction with the voices is going on. This is further supported by the way Prufrock imagines himself: when being noticed, he does not treat himself as a living, breathing human; rather, public attention makes him feel as if he is “sprawling on a pin… wriggling on the wall” (57-58) – more like a bug than a man. This is accentuated by his desire to be a pair of scuttling claws (73-74); a desire to be a creature of action, not a creature of communication (Blythe, 170). The idea that Prufrock is portrayed as less than human is again reinforced when he dons his clothes and, as Cervo puts it, becomes a “dressed-up mannequin” (208).

Prufrock’s life is one devoid of recognition as a distinct individual, both by others and by himself. The parallels between his situation and the life of Lampman’s Idiot and idols suggest that their lives, to some extent, must be afflicted by the same problems. These problems are summed up by Saunders when she says, “We know Eliot’s Prufrock is in hell or its equivalent because of the poem’s epigraph. His wretchedness and self-condemnation reinforce our natural inclination to interpret his environment, however apparently privileged, as a hell on earth.” (3) This “apparently privileged” (Saunders, 3) life is very similar to that of Lampman’s idols and Idiot. Prufrock, like the idols, confines
himself from the public and thus has problems expressing who he is. He also is seen as little more than an object, which is similar to the overshadowing of identity by public forces that the idols experience, as well as the statuesque nature of the Idiot. And, finally, Prufrock’s identification by who he is not is almost identical to the situation formed by the Idiot’s threads of memory being “snapt and cut” (42). These very similar situations suggest that the lives of the idiot and idols, to some extent, must be pervaded by the same “wretchedness” that Prufrock experiences.

Both Lampman and Eliot suggest, through the lives we see in their poems, that the inability to express one’s true identity and be noticed for it contributes to an undesirable existence. Being social animals, a moment’s introspection is all it takes to see how the inability to express one’s inner self can emulate a life similar to the cities portrayed by these two poets. Lampman’s portrayal of the unindividualized masses experience seems accurate, with regards to similar real world events that have happened. We have all heard about and seen the results of situations similar to the lives of the masses at one point or another, whether it be Hitler’s oppression of Jews, Gypsies, and other non-Aryan races during World War Two, the somewhat satirical (yet still notable) misconception that all Canadians live in igloos, or even the subtler cues we see when social labels like “punk” or “yuppie” or “beatnik” influence our initial impressions of people more than anything intrinsic to the individual. The world of the idol is just as devoid of recognition of intrinsic qualities of the individual. It is hard to believe that celebrities like Michael Jackson will ever be viewed as something less than what the media portrays them as, or George Bush as less than a warmonger to those who view him that way. This does not necessarily mean that the portrayals are wrong; the point is that mass opinion would
probably influence interactions with them more than any small deviations from character that they may further exhibit. The thought that these are rectifiable problems is doubtful. There have been similar instances pocked throughout the face of history for the past two millennia, and even some commonplace and traditionally worthy notions like nationalism are rooted in the act of generalization. It is human nature to assume that general assumptions will be applicable to all who fit the preconceived mold, and sometimes it can lead to some horribly atrocious situations for the person being labeled, as Lampman and Eliot have pointed out in their poems.