

# Interpreting T.S. ELIOT'S- THE HOLLOW MEN

**MONTI MAZUMDAR**

Lecturer in English

Government Maharani Sudarshan Girls (P.G.) College, Bikaner Rajasthan

Abstract: uncanny and dream-like, The Hollow Men describes a desolate world, populated by empty, defeated people. Though the poet describes these people as dead, and the world they inhabit as the underworld, the poem should not be read simply a description of life after death. One of the major themes prevalent in the poem is the struggle to maintain hope. The hollow men hope that they will be rescued from their stagnant state, but this seems unlikely, as they cannot even bring themselves to look at any of the souls who pass through.

Mistah Kurtz- he dead  
A penny for the old guy.

The poem begins with an epigraph, a written statement after the death of Mistah Kurtz, an ivory trader from Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. His connection to the poem likely comes from a quote describing him as being hollow. He does not have a moral compass to guide him or the instincts of a decent human being.

The second epigraph is slightly more complicated and is connected to the historical figure Guy Fawkes and his plot to blow up the parliament in the early 1600s. The phrase "penny for the guy" is connected to asking for money on 5th of November, or Guy Fawkes day. One should also consider other connections between death and a penny or coin. The most important is Charon, the ferryman who is responsible for guiding the newly dead across the river Styx. Without a coin to pay him, one would become stuck. This is partially the situation that the hollow men are in.

In a sense, The Hollow Men is a sequel to The Waste Land, referring as it does to the wastelands inhabitants, who are hollow because of their disconnection from a faith that would enrich their lives. First epigraph, from Joseph Conrad's Heart Of Darkness. Kurtz was the ivory trader, a hollow man, in the sense that he sacrificed his humanity for the promise of wealth.

Second epigraph: The Old Guy is Guy Fawkes, who in 1605, tried to blow up the parliament buildings in London, as a protest against King James' anti-Catholic legislation. He is still burned in effigy every November 5, the anniversary of his aborted crime.

The first lines pick up the image of Guy Fawkes burned in effigy ( headpiece filled with straw) in the form of a scarecrow. He represents the hollow men who live in the wasteland of modern society, inarticulate and ineffectual (Deaths other kingdom) seems almost preferable.

The Hollow men seem to yearn for 'deaths dream kingdom', for all its drab and dreary ambience, a better place than the wasteland they currently inhabit.

In the poems third part,the first stanza presents a stark vision of the dead land, the cactus land.The second stanza suggests hollow men's inability to pray, to communicate, to make love.

The Hollow Men is a poem written in 1925 by T.S.Eliot.The first section of the poem opens to a group of hollow men.Everything about them is dry, from their bodies to their voices. Everything they do is meaningless. In the second section,one of them is afraid to look at the people who made it into death's dream kingdom, something the Hollow Men cannot do.The third section finds them in a barren land where they are unable to do the things they desire.In the fourth section , the Hollow Men from section two talks about the desolate setting they are in, afraid to look at people or have people look at them.Finally ,in the fifth section ,children sing a nursery rhyme while they skip around a cactus.A shadow has gained control of them, rendering them unable to thin...

One of the major themes prevalent in the poem is the struggle to maintain hope.The Hollow Men hope that they will be rescued from their stagnant state, but this seem unlikely , as they cannot even bring themselves to look at any of the souls who pass through. The star represent their hope, both of which grow dimmer as the poem progresses.

Another theme that is interwoven into the poem is the concept of identity.When the Hollow Men speak,they speak in unison because they do not have individual identities.Rather than real people, they are empty voids.While they do have emotions,like fear and sadness, the poet views them to be incapable of regular human emotions.They truly have no identity.

A third theme of the poem is the theme of exile.The Hollow Men are struck on the banks of the River Acheron, and though they are dead,they cannot cross into the realm of death.In Dante's Inferno,it is explained that some souls can be accepted into neither Hell nor Heaven.They are not evil,but they are not inherently good, either. Instead of taking a stance for one side or the other, they were only concerned with their own affairs and did not care enough about the world around them to choose good or evil in the first place.While Dante felt that the majority of humanity fell into this category, it seems as though the Hollow Men did,too.

This poem is perhaps the most negative and pessimistic of all the poems of T.S.Eliot, whereas *The Wasteland* and *Ash Wednesday* are relieved by the hope of redemption. *The Hollow Men* presents a picture of unmitigated horror of modern life and Modernism. It is in no way relieved by a ray of hope or light. The poem is gloomy and dark like death's other kingdom.

*The Hollow Men* is a personal poem. It presents the poet's views on contemporary life. It is a cry of despair unrelieved by hope. Modern civilization, the pride of many nations has been shown as negative and lacking life's values. The peculiarity of the poem is that it is an inner drama with the utmost economy of words. As a critic comments: "There is little mythical variety. The effect is of a monotone, a chant without variation. There is a good deal of repetition of parallel clauses and expressions. There are suggestions of poetic diction, as also by some lines referring to Dante's *Divine Comedy*- "Gathered on the beach of this tumid river". The recurrent images and the fragments of Lord's prayer are introduced to represent the poet's faith and divine grace. The ...

The eye symbol is exploited by the poet. Eliot plays on the various meanings of the eyes: "The eyes are not here/ There are no eyes here". Then the poet mentions direct eyes which refers to the eyes of men of action with a purpose, though rough and violent, like *Mistah Kurtz* and *Guy Fawkes*. Secondly, there are the eyes of the lord.

The eyes of hollow men will be full of shame and remorse when they, thus, will be presented to render their account to God. There is also the symbol of light in various shades-"Sunlight on a broken column/than a fading star..../In the twilight kingdom/In this valley of dying star..". The groping together on the beach of the river, the light of the Perpetual Star, and finally the shadow which has a very deep meaning though the diction is compact and bare. The images and symbols constitute the strong point of the poem.

Eliot explains that *The Hollow Men* is a combination of the title of two poems namely, William Morris's poem *The Hollow Land* and Rudyard Kipling's *The Broken Man*. There is a mention of 'Hollow man' in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In the play, this phrase was used by Brutus when he learns that his fellow conspirator Cassius is behaving in a less friendly way towards him. Brutus feels that the Hollow men are like inexperienced horses who fail in the trials of racing competition. In the poem, the Hollow Men refer to the unfeeling, inactive, and lifeless men of modern world.

There are two epigraphs which throw light on the poem's theme. The first epigraph *Mistah Kurtz- he dead*, is taken from Joseph Conrad's novel *The Heart Of Darkness*. These words were spoken by Marlowe, reporting the death of Kurtz. *Mistah Kurtz* was the agent of a colonial compliance, living in the interior of Africa. He was very harsh and violent. He died in Africa. According to Eliot, it is better to be violent and evil than to be inactive and dead like the Hollow men of today.

The second epigraph A penny for the old guy is a line of a song sung by children who celebrate Guy Fawkes day .The children beg for money to buy fire works for the celebration of the day.They carry the effigy of Guy made of old clothes, stuffed with straw and paper.In the evening, the effigy is burnt on the top of a bonfire in the midst of the deafening sounds of the fireworks fixed around the effigy.Guy Fawkes was a notorious Catholic who plotted to blow up the parliament house and thereby kill the king and minister on 5th November, 1605.He was arrested and hanged.In his memory, Guy Fawkes day is observed in England on 5th of November every year.Eliot suggests that the Hollow Men of today are like the effigy of Guy Fawkes which is stuffed with straw, and burnt by children.

The Hollow Men of the poem are themselves trapped in some sort of between- world , a limbo or purgatory between death and life, existence and nothingness, light and darkness.

In five sections,the poet lets the collective voice of the Hollow Men address us from their between- world which is at once a desert space( cactus land) and a place suggestive of entropic decay, as though the end of the world or even the universe has come: that fading star ,the general lifelessness of the world the Hollow Men inhabit, imply that this land of twilight is a world in its death throes.

And indeed,when we reach the final lines of the poem, we are told that we are witnessing the end of the world, which happens anticlimactically ,with a whimper rather than a bang.

This moment is filled with religious significance- as the allusions to the Lord's Prayer suggest- but any attempt at prayer is only half - formed and half- achieved: those prayers to broken stones prefigure the failed attempts to utter the full conclusion to the Lord's Prayer(For thine is the kingdom ,the Power and the Glory, for ever and ever,Amen).

Like The Waste Land, The Hollow Men began life as a series of shorter poems: early versions of part of The Hollow Men are included in the Collected Poems 1909-1962.These and several other short verses were published as Doris's Dream Songs in The Chapbook in 1924.

They share a number of features: the five part structure, the use of sombre allusions ( the Book of Common Prayers in The Waste Land; the Lord's Prayer in The Hollow Men) alongside snippets of classic nursery rhymes( London Bridge is falling down in The Waste Land; Here we go round the Mulberry bush in The Hollow Men) ,the references to a sort of wasteland world populated by rats and lost souls.

Yet it would be a mistake , perhaps, to interpret The Hollow Men as a mere add on to that earlier, more famous poem.Although it is not about development or progress itself- instead,it is about stasis ,immobility and a sense of being trapped- The Hollow Men does move T.S.ELIOT'S poetry on in a number of key ways.

The Hollow Men is a poem about repetition: in the Collected Poems 1909- 62, that title The Hollow Men, is given twice. The poem has two epigraphs ' Here we go round the prickly pear' is repeated ,as is 'prickly pear' in the line that falls between the two ' Here we go ' lines,' This is the way the world ends' is repeated not once,or twice, but thrice.at the end of the poem.

Allusions to Joseph Conrad is repeated ,too, for ' Life is very long', like' Mistah Kurtz- he dead' from Heart of Darkness(1899), quotes from Conrad's fiction, this time from An Outcast of the Islands (1896).

Indeed,a clue to the prominent themes of the poem is provided by the poem's two epigraphs. The first is the four word declaration of the villain Mr Kurtz's death given by an African boy to Marlow, the second narrator of Conrad's Heart of Darkness.

This allusion teases us with possible readings of the poem that follows: is the poem, like Heart of Darkness, about the dark side of imperialism? Is it significant, given the title of Eliot's poem( derived by combining William Morris's The Hollow Land with Rudyard Kipling's The Broken Men), that in Conrad's novel , the vile figure of Colonialism, Kurtz, is being described as' Hollow at the core'?.

Perhaps.But then we come to the second epigraph, this time a reference to the familiar child's cry on Guy Fawkes night -A penny for the old guy.Effigies of Fawkes, the conspirator, arrested for his involvement in the Gunpowder Plot to blow King James first and the House of Parliament , are burnt every year in England.

But with this epigraph, it begins to look less likely that empire is the theme of this poem.But the reference to straw effigies does pave the way for the poem's ' stuffed men' with the headpieces ' filled with straw'.

The first four sections of the poem describe the situation of the titular men, dwelling in the dead land and desert space ( cactus land,reminiscent of The Waste Land) , in a sort of twilight world between death and dying. There is a 'tumid river' which might be interpreted as an allusion to River Styx, the river across which the dead are ferried to Hades.

The fifth and final section of the poem is a little different: it begins with a song suggesting a dance around the aforementioned cactus ( round the prickly pear) at the ungodly hour of five in the morning.We then get a series of 'between' statements, which could not be more appropriate for this poem about interim states.

What is being described here? One possible interpretation is that Eliot is talking about that other interim state between death and life- not at the end of our lives, but at the beginning. Between the conception and the creation- what is a baby after it has been conceived but before it has been born?.

This question is obviously a fraught one in the context of stem- cell research and debates over abortion. And what about the conception of a new life itself?. Between the desire( erotic) and the spasm( orgasm) ?. And do we need to dwell on the seminal possibilities of a word like ' essence' in this connection?.

This is not to say that such an analysis of Eliot's lines decides the matter for once and for all, of course. But the fact that this series of between statements , almost like a chant, is punctuated by a reference to life itself( Life is very long) and to the words of the Lord's Prayer ( For thine is the kingdom) suggest the almost divine miracle of human life.

But this has to be balanced against the wretched existence of the Hollow men, who are- like one of the speakers from The Waste Land- ' neither living nor dead' .One is even tempted to propose that these hollow men are the souls of the babies who never made it, whether because they were aborted or as a result of miscarriage- but then they wouldn't just be men , surely, nor would they be adults at all, perhaps.

The Hollow Men remains an elusive poem, like much of T.S.ELIOT'S work. It perhaps presents even more of a challenge to comprehension and close analysis than The Waste Land does.

But it moves Eliot's work forward into more spiritual territory, albeit tentatively. Two years after The Hollow Men was published, Eliot would join the Church of England. The same year, he would renounce his U.S passport in exchange for U.K citizenship. The between- man , the Anglo- American poet of the age, would be ' between ' no more.

The line ' Life is very long' seems to be a simple expression of their exasperation, the Hollow Men feel, for their own situation. Due to their position somewhere between life and death. The speaker characterizes the Hollow men's voices as 'dried'. Instead of sounding like normal human voices, full of emotion and information, they are " quiet and meaningless/ As wind in dry grass". In other words , their voices no longer sound like human voices- not carrying emotion or information, like human voices are supposed to do. Instead, their voices have become as random and senseless as the wind itself. The hollow men are more than simply empty In the sense of being sad or despairing- rather, they've lost their humanity.



And in the process, the Hollow Men have become a danger to human societies. In section two, the speaker describes himself wearing a 'rat's coat' and 'crow'skin', symbolizing disease and death, and also suggesting that these men are dangerous to be around because they happen to be contagious, their despair is like a plague that passes from person to person.

Indeed, these men seem incapable of actually doing much of anything- much less being intentionally destructive. In section three, the speaker notes that they 'would kiss' each other, but they can't. Instead, they 'form prayers to broken stones'- implying that they are worshipping false idols. And they cannot bring themselves to come into contact with each other or with other people; they aren't able to act on their desires or impulses.

However ineffective these Hollow Men are, however unable to act on their impulses, they nonetheless have a strong effect on the world around them. Indeed, the environment in which they live seems to have taken on their characteristics. For example, the speaker describes the landscape as a 'hollow valley' and as a desert, having only prickly cactuses for vegetation; the wind whistles mournfully through it. The landscape is just as Hollow as they are.

The landscape also reverberates the image of a damaged culture. The speaker says that in the desolate landscape, the eyes (a symbol for God's judgement) are 'sunlight on a broken column'. The column serving as a symbol of western civilization and culture: columns are one of the defining architectural features of ancient Greek and Roman temples. For such a symbol to be broken suggests that the landscape the speaker describes is more broadly symbolic of western civilization in decline.

The poem serves as a reflection on the state of European culture at the time of Eliot's writing, right after world War 1- a devastating war that shook many people's faith in European culture and left behind a shattered generation of soldiers who survived. The poem's judgment of European culture after world War 1 is very negative: the culture itself is in decline and the people who could preserve it are empty, ineffectual, and even dangerous to their own societies.

In the opening line of the poem, the speaker makes a strange and unsettling announcement: he is part of a group of hollow people. Moreover, he lives in a landscape which is itself Hollow. As the poem proceeds, however, it becomes clear that the speaker's hollowness is not strictly literal. Instead, it serves as an extended metaphor for the decay of European society and culture.

The speaker describes himself, and his fellow Hollow men- as inhuman, dangerous, and incapable of taking real action. They cannot finish the Lord's Prayer.

On its surface, the poem is not a religion poem. Throughout, however, the speaker makes a series of subtle religious references and allusions. These references suggest that the 'Hollow Men' have lost their connection to God. The speaker thus suggests that they might be restored- become fully human again- if they could regain their faith. At the same time, he also suggests that such renewed faith is impossible for them.

The speaker of the poem regularly suggests that he and his companions have lost contact with God. For example, the speaker describes the Hollow men praying to stone images. This alludes to the passages in the Bible where the Israelites stop worshipping God and instead start following false gods, often represented by 'graven images'. What then happens in the Bible, is God punishing the Israelites for failing to worship him properly. The allusion suggests that the Hollow men are like the backsliding Israelites: they too have strayed from their religious commitments and fallen into idolatry.

Similarly, the speaker describes the Hollow men as blind, and sightless. Their only hope of regaining their sight is a 'multifoliate rose'. The rose is a traditional symbol of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism. The speaker thus suggests that the Hollow men need the Virgin Mary's help to regain their sight.

These religious references reach their peak in the fifth section of the poem. In this section the poem quotes directly from the Book of Matthew (Thine is the kingdom). This is an allusion to a longer passage in which Christ says, "Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever, Amen". Here Christ means that God is ruler of the universe and always will be. However, the speaker does not quote this passage from the Bible: instead it appears indented, in italics. This indicates that it is in a different voice: in other words, it is not the Hollow men speaking but someone else, entering the poem briefly.

The other voice is connected with God: whoever the voice is, he or she knows the Bible and is capable of quoting from it. The shadow is symbolic of anxiety, fear, and death. The 'shadow' is powerful, intervening in some of the basic forces necessary for the universe to work, and prevents them from functioning properly. The shadow separates the 'idea' from the 'reality', "the motion" from "the act", "the conception" from "the creation". Essentially, it is severing cause from effect, or action from meaning.

To the speaker, the shadow seems unbeatable: he ends the poem imagining the world "ending, simply pattering out" not with a bang but a whimper". As the shadow cuts cause from effect, the world slowly runs down, unable to sustain itself. However, the allusion to the Bible earlier in the poem reminds the reader that- from a religious point of view- God should or at least could set it all right. The resources are there to restore the hollow men and the culture they represent, to a full, healthy relationship with the almighty. That they cannot regain this relationship suggests that such intimacy with God is permanently lost, at least in the world of this poem. Though the speaker longs nostalgically for a lost religious faith, he has given up trying to get it back.



T.S.ELIOT as a Modernist writer , meaning that he was part of a movement that rejected earlier formal structures in poetry and writing. This is one of the reasons why the poem is so unusual in its form.The present poem does not follow a specific meter or rhyme scheme. Thus,the poem has a disjointed, unsettling feel to it that echoes the deep psychological pain and fear that the speaker is experiencing throughout the work.Modernist writing was in many ways a response to the horrors of the First World War,which made many people feel that the structure and certainly that they had previously relied on no longer existed.

One of the most striking elements of The Hollow Men is Eliot's use of allusion throughout the poem.There are four major allusions that strongly influence how the poem is formed.The first comes from the poem's epigraph:" Mistah Kurtz- he dead".This is a line from Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad .Conrad's book is about the horrors of imperialism and the collapse of meaning in the life of the protagonist. The inclusion of this allusion is an indication that the poem is going to discuss this destruction of meaning and a similar kind of intense horror to what the protagonist of Conrad's novel experiences.

The second line of the epigraph is another allusion " A penny for the old Guy" .Instead of referring to a work of literature,this line is a reference to Guy Fawkes Day and the Gunpowder Plot .In 1605,a man named Guy Fawkes attempted to blow up the British Houses of Parliament. He was caught and was subsequently tortured and executed. Guy Fawkes Day in Britain is celebrated by burning effigies of Guy Fawkes, and it has traditionally been common for children to ask for " A penny for the old Guy " to pay for fireworks. The effigies are essentially scarecrows,which is a direct parallel with the Hollow men of the poem.

One of the main texts that Eliot works off in the poem is Dante's Divine Comedy. In this work,Dante is lead through Hell,Purgatory, and Heaven. The mention of "Death's dream Kingdom " and the speakers questions and concerns about the nature of death and the after life .On the same religious theme ,the final major allusion in the poem is to the Lord's Prayer in the fifth part of the poem.The lines of the prayer are fragmented,perhaps suggesting that the speaker and other people in the modern world are struggling to form functional relationships with God the way that they used to.

### References

- 1 The Complete Poems & Plays of T.S.ELIOT- Faber and Faber.
- 2 Leonard Unger( ed) T.S.Eliot:A selected Critique ( New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1948)
- 3 George Williams, Reader's Guide to T.S.Eliot ( London: Thames & Hudson 1967)
- 4 Bosley D.Brotman,T.S.Eliot; The music of Ideas .University of Toronto Quarterly 18 th(1948).