

# The Hollow Men: An Inimitable Representation Of Degeneration In Human Civilisation

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**Abstract:** *The Hollow men by T.S.Eliot was published in 1925 and clearly stands as a commentary on the predicament of the human civilisation after the traumatic experiences of the First World War. It represents the devastated conditions of the orientation of the common human soul. The agony, degeneration, suffering, and hopelessness of the modern men are the general areas of concern for T.S.Eliot, which are projected through different images and symbols. But these projections do not limit to reflect only the immediately following decades of the First World War rather go beyond to connect the Ages of virgil and the Hindu mythologies to the contemporary globalised and post modern era of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this paper I would like to critically evaluate the poem's theme and structure to unfold the eternal relevance and universality of the poem.*

**Keywords:** *degeneration, modern world, spiritual flaccidity, death-in-life, Hindu trinity*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The Hollow Men* is one of the most celebrated poems written by T.S.Eliot in the second phase of his creative career, extending from 1919 to 1926. It was composed in 1925. When we read this poem we do hear distant echo from *Prufrock*, *Gerontion*, and *The Waste Land*. In contrast to *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men* is simpler in structure and conception. *The Waste land* represents universal chaos by revealing a series of insights into individual lives expressive of that chaos; its structure is episodic, and its effect depends greatly on the cumulative effect of the episodes. This poem is gifted with a fund of symbolism and imagery which constitute the language of this poem. The 'heap of broken images' is indeed terrifying, not simply because the images are broken, but because they are so many. Eliot's individual talent culled the central symbolism of this poem from tradition. Indeed the central symbolism owes to the influence of Dante and his *The Divine Comedy*. Most commentators on *The Hollow Men* trace an emotional progression in the poem from Dante's 'hell', through his 'purgatory', towards his 'paradise'. But it would be surprising if in *The Hollow Men* Virgil's 'after world' were not present alongside Dante's. E.J.Stormon and Grover Smith are among the critics to have recognized that *The Hollow men*

alludes to *Aeneid* vi. Grover Smith holds that this poem produces a new effect both metrically and for its use of rhetorical devices.

Before I elaborately discuss the poetical embellishments let us have a general view of this poem and compare it with the poems that follow and those that have preceded it. As in *Gerontion* the reader is only aware of a voice speaking in soliloquy while the persona is not objectively present; similarly in *The Hollow Men* we hear the voice of one of the hollow men whispering in soliloquy. The formation of the soliloquy instantly strikes us; it is written in irregular rhythm and cut piece images. This use of imagery reminds us of the imagistic technique, already utilized in *Preludes*. Abrupt images like 'wind in dry grass' or 'rat's feet over broken glass' startle the reader at first sight. True but they all lead him from the first shock of surprise to the fountain head of profound meaning.

## II. MAIN BODY

As is the characteristic of Eliot's poetry, in *The Hollow Men* also we notice a recurrence of the same Eliotian themes. The first line of the third part- 'this is the dead land'- recalls

the basic theme in *The Waste Land*. The stone images in the 'cactus land' lead us to that part of *The Waste Land* known as 'The Burial of the Dead'.

*The Hollow Men* and *Gerontion* are thematically the same. The note of despair, the scream of agony and a vivid description of dryness recur in both the poems. *Gerontion* waits for the rain at a rented house in a dry month with thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season. *The hollow men* have dried voices, sounding like 'wind in dry grass':

"Or rat's feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar."

But in *Gerontion* and *The Hollow Men* we hear the soliloquy of a speaker in a state of utter loneliness. Here there are many hollow men: but only one of them speaks. In the speeches of both *Gerontion* and member of the hollow men there are many dramatic turns and pauses. Moreover, both the poems exploit many dramatic devices. Especially *The Hollow Men* abounds in dramatic moments and dramatic tricks. According to Grover Smith, "In *The Hollow Men* since its drama mainly depends on a continuing voice, nothing like a plot is visible, and the images are simply disconnected." Despite the dramatic postures- the hollow men "leaning together", the "tree swinging", the lips praying to "broken stone", the groping shapes beside the "tumid river", and the despondent shuffle round "the prickly pear"- there are no dramatically motivated actions. There are no beginning and middle; only an end. This poem deals with the state of its own protagonist like *Prufrock* and *Gerontion*. In *Gerontion* there is a conflict between the vastness of material knowledge and an emptiness of spiritual knowledge. In *Prufrock* there is a conflict between reality and romanticism. In *The Hollow Men* also there is a great crisis. Just like *The Waste Land* this poem also deals with a quest and failure. Thus the conflict in *The Hollow Men* centers round a quest and failure. *The Hollow Men* are modern men. The cavities of their brain are stuffed with straw. They live in a state of death-in-life condition. They form as a group of scarecrow like effigies. As *Gerontion* is waiting for rain, the hollow men are waiting for death. It is through death that they can be relieved of the death-in-life state. One of the straw dummies among the hollow men is waiting for the consuming fire to which an effigy is subject. This fire is the symbol of death-symbol of purification-symbol of purification. Eliot here recalls the purgatorial fire in *The Divine Comedy* of Dante.

The epigraphs indicate two lines of analogy drawn by *The Hollow Men*. "Mr. Kurtz-he dead", from *Heart of Darkness*, is the black servant's contemptuous announcement that the remarkable white god of the Congo has expired. "A Penny for the Old Guy" is the formula by which children solicit money for fireworks on 'Guy Fawkes Day', the fifth of November. The connection between Kurtz and Guy Fawkes is that both are "lost/violent souls" commemorated only as "The hollow men/...the stuffed men". Indeed, Marlow calls Kurtz "hollow at the core".

The theme of *The Hollow Men* is based on the debasement through the rejection of good- on despair through consequent guilt. The theme of despair and debasement- this sense of failure in quest is very much evident in the first part of the poem, especially in the last few lines:

"Those who have crossed

With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom  
Remember us -if at all-not as lost  
Violent Souls, but only  
As the hollow men  
The stuffed men."

The predicament of the hollow men is that of the waste Landers: they lack the 'courage to be' and they have lost their reality because they have never affirmed it. They are remembered

"...not as lost  
Violent souls, but only  
As the hollow men  
The stuffed men."

In his essay on Baudelaire, Eliot Writes.

"It is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least, we exist."

The hollow men are those who have not even existed to the extent of doing evil. Their malady lies not in any evil intention, but in their evasion of any intention whatever.

The second part of the poem deals with the symbolic meaning of 'eyes'. In the first part there is reference to the eyes of which the hollow men are deprived. Both the hollow men and *Gerontion* and the Fisher king of *The Waste Land* are eyeless. The case of the hollow men is much worse, because they are not only eyeless, they are also afraid of facing the eyes, even in dreams-in the dream kingdom of the world. One of the symbols which emphasize the evasiveness of the hollow men is that of the eyes. While it is not clear whose eyes they are, it is enough that they represent spiritual challenge, and that the hollow men refused to meet them represents evasion of spiritual challenge. The eyes appear first as

"Eyes I dare not meet in dreams;"  
And the shrinking from  
"...that final meeting  
In the twilight kingdom"  
Suggests that they may be Christ's own, which  
"Those who have crossed  
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom"

They have presumably not evaded. The eyes are noticeably absent from the twilight world in which the hollow men exist:

"The eyes are not here  
There are no eyes here  
In this valley of dying stars"

In the fourth part of the eyes are linked with the perpetual star, and their appearance evokes hope as well as fear:

"The hope only  
Of empty men"

This confirms their significance as a symbol of divine demand, and suggests that perhaps Maxwell is right when with Dante's vision of the Blessed Virgin in Paradise.

The *Hollow Men* protagonist desires to think himself as a scarecrow. He likes concealment among other hollow men, wearing scarecrow disguise:

"Rat's coat, crow skin, crossed staves  
In a field  
Behaving as the wind behaves"

Associated with the image of the guy, and fulfilling a similar function, is the scarecrow suggested in these lines. The scarecrow symbolism is very much appropriate to designate

the spiritual hollowness of the speaker. This too seems to be mocking human behaviour and it is this guise that the hollow men choose to assume. They do not want to assert their freedom in any spiritual or moral choice; they chose rather to act arbitrarily, gratifying their most immediate needs, but being guided by no transcending purpose. The scarecrow symbol is appropriate to designate not only the ineptness and spiritual flaccidity of the speaker but, like the "tattered coat upon a stick" in Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium*, his inability to attain love.

A third symbol which recurs several times in the poem is that of the two contrasting kingdoms.

Both are kingdoms of death: the contrast lies in the fact that the kingdom of this world is more shadowy and less real than the kingdom beyond the grave. It is helpful for the understanding of the poem to assume that, in the poem 'death's dream kingdom' always means this world, as distinct from 'death's other kingdom', the place of "Those who have crossed/with direct eyes..."

There is also another kingdom-twilight kingdom which obviously means 'death's other kingdom', the dead remember the hollow men or forget them. This is an inversion of the idea that the dead 'live on' in the memory of the living. Here the lives of the living are so unreal that they exist, if at all, only in the memory of those who, though dead are more real than they.

In the third part of the poem the world of the hollow men is described also as 'dead land', 'cactus land', and 'this broken jaw of our lost kingdom'. Like *The Waste Land*, it is a region where nothing is fruitful, for the human endeavour of the hollow men is barren. In this desert environment, desire is misdirected and frustrated and passionate need meets with no response:

"Is it like this  
In death's other kingdom  
Waking alone  
At the hour when we are  
Trembling with tenderness  
Lips that would kiss  
Form prayers to broken stone."

Worship, too is misdirected: the stone images are as dead as the men who worship them, and relationship with any god is as meaningless for the hollow men as their attempts at relationship with any human being. The 'star' image is another key image in the poem. In the lines

"More distant and more solemn  
Than a fading star."

It seems to be used primarily for its evocativeness, but in other passages it is more clearly a symbol. In the third section "Under the twinkle of a fading star"

It seems to refer to some spiritual reality, or a consciousness of some spiritual reality, which is disappearing. It seems to associate the star of Bethlehem with the traveller's guiding star, and it hints also at the idea that the sun is in fact a fading star which will one day cease to give sufficient heat for the subsistence of life on the earth. Thus the image conveys a sense of the loss both of spiritual guidance and of sustaining

life. The powers that make possible human life, and indeed any light at all are vanishing, leaving humanity

"In this valley of dying star."

Where

"We grope together

And avoid speech

Gathered on this beach of the tumid river"

The fourth part of the poem establishes geography; the scarecrows loitering beside the tumid river, are trapped in the valley of bones where their suffering seems futile. There is the 'dream kingdom' where the eyes are but a memory. They must invade the other kingdom- the kingdom of actual death. And through this purgatorial trial, they will rise to the 'multifoliate rose', the 'perpetual star'- a symbol of the holy virgin. Thus the hollow men are not devoid of hope, since they are in the purgatorial state. They have failed in their quest; but they hope to find out the rose garden- the spiritual state.

The first four lines of the last part parody "The Mulberry Bush", substituting for the fertility symbol connoting love- an image purely phallic. This May pole is a fertility symbol. The hollow men must remain sightless until and unless the 'rose' reappears and love along with the powers of creation and repentance blesses the world of nightmare. In the fifth part of *The Hollow Men* Eliot brings forth this problem of regeneration. In this case Eliot may have had in mind in time of conceiving of this problem the Hindu Trinity-the Brahman, Vishnu, and Shiva. Brahman is the power in mind; Vishnu, the power in spirit which preserves men from evil: Shiva, the power in sex and in the cycle of death and rebirth.

### III. CONCLUSION

Thus the whole poem is dominated by a sense of horror-horror of an earthly hell where the hollow men must wait for death to liberate them into the twilight of the final meeting between self and death, flesh and spirit. The hollow men of every Age are waiting for a spiritual ascent through descent into the burnt out remains of their scarecrow, effigy like existence with 'headpiece filled with straw'.

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