

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 buried in effigy (a 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.