

# Analysis of 'The Hollow Men' by T. S. Eliot

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Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri of New England descent, on 26 September, 1888. He entered Harvard University in 1906, completed his courses in three years and earned a master's degree the next year. After a year at the Sorbonne in Paris, he returned to Harvard. Further study led him to Merton College, Oxford, and he decided to stay in England. He worked first as a teacher and then in Lloyd's Bank until 1925. Then he joined the London publishing firm of Faber and Gwyer, becoming director when the firm became Faber and Faber in 1929. Eliot won the Nobel prize for literature in 1948 and several other major literary awards.

(1)  
After settling in London Eliot found that the poetic mode being employed by the Georgian poets, who were active at England at the time, contained no verbal excitement or original craftsmanship. He sought to make poetry more subtle, more suggestive, and at the same time more precise. He learned the necessity of clear and precise images, and he learned too, to fear romantic softness and to regard the poetic medium rather than the poet's personality as the important factor. Eliot saw in the French symbolists how image could be both absolutely precise in what it referred to physically, and at the same time endlessly suggestive in the meanings it set up because of its relationship to other images. Eliot's real novelty was his deliberate elimination of all merely connective and transitional passages, his building up of the total pattern of meaning through the immediate comparison of images without overt explanation of what they are doing, together with his use of indirect references to other works of literature - some at times quite obscure. (2)

Eliot starts his poem "The Hollow Men" with a quote from Joseph Conrad's novel the Heart of Darkness. The line "Mistah Kurtz - he dead" refers to a Mr. Kurtz, a European trader who had gone in the "the heart of

darkness" by travelling into the central African jungle, with European standards of life and conduct. Because he had no moral or spiritual strength to sustain him, he was soon turned into a barbarian. He differs, however, from Eliot's "hollow men" as he is not paralysed as they are, but on his death catches a glimpse of the nature of his actions when he claims "The Horror! the Horror!" Kurtz is thus one of the "lost violent souls" mentioned in lines 15-16. Eliot next continues with "A penny for the Old Guy". This is a reference to the cry of English children soliciting money for fireworks to commemorate Guy Fawkes day, November 5; which commemorates the "gunpowder plot" of 1605 in which Guy Fawkes and other conspirators planned to blow up both houses of Parliament. On this day, which commemorates the failure of the explosion, the likes of Fawkes are burned in effigy and mock explosions using fireworks are produced. The relation of this custom to the poem suggests another inference: as the children make a game of make believe out of Guy Fawkes, so do we make a game out of religion.(3)

The first lines bring the title and theme into a critical relationship. We are like the "Old Guy", effigies stuffed with straw. It may also be noticed that the first and last part of the poem indicate a church service, and the ritual service throughout. This is indicated in the passages "Leaning together...whisper together", and the voices "quiet and meaningless" as the service drones on. The erstwhile worshippers disappear in a blur of shape, shade gesture, to which normality is attached. Then the crucial orientation is developed, towards "death's other Kingdom. "We know that we are in the Kingdom of death, not as "violent souls" but as empty effigies, "filled with straw", of this religious service. (4)

Part two defines the hollow men in relation to the reality with those "direct eyes have met". "Direct eyes" symbolizing those who represent something positive (direct). Fortunately, the eyes he dare not meet even in dreams do not appear in "death's dream kingdom." They are only reflected through broken light and shadows, all is perceived indirectly. He would not be any nearer, any more direct, in this twilight kingdom. He fears the ultimate vision. (5)

Part three defines the representation of death's kingdom in relationship to the worship of the hollow men. A dead, arid land, like it's people, it raises stone images of the spiritual, which are implored by the dead. And again the "fading star" establishes a sense of remoteness from reality. The

image of  
 frustrated love which follows is a moment of anguished illumination  
 suspended  
 between the two kingdoms of death. Lips that would adore, pray instead  
 to a  
 broken image. The "broken stone" unites the "stone images"  
 and the broken column," which bent the sunlight. (6)

Part four explores this impulse in relation  
 to the land, which now darkens progressively as the valley of the  
 shadow of  
 death. Now there  
 are not even hints of  
 the eyes (of the positive), and the "fading" becomes the  
 "dying" star. In action the hollow men now "grope together / And  
 avoid speech", gathered on the banks of the swollen river which must be  
 crossed to get to "death's other kingdom". The contrast with  
 part I  
 is clear. Without any eyes at all they are without any vision, unless  
 "the  
 eyes" return as the "perpetual", not  
 a fading or dying star. But for empty men  
 this is only a hope. As  
 the star becomes  
 a rose, so the rose becomes the rose windows of the church; the rose as  
 an  
 image of the church and multifoliate. Which is a reference to  
 Dante's Divine  
 Comedy, where the multifoliate rose is a symbol of paradise, in which  
 the  
 saints are the petals of the rose. (7)

But Part Five develops the reality, not the  
 hope of the empty men; the cactus not the rose. The nursery level make  
 believe  
 mocks the hope of empty men. In desire they "go round the prickly  
 pear" but are frustrated by the prickles. The poem now develops the  
 frustration  
 of impulse. At various levels, and in various aspects of life, there  
 falls the  
 frustrating shadow of fear, the essential shadow of this land. Yet the  
 shadow  
 is more than fear: it concentrates the valley of shadow into a shape of  
 horror,  
 almost a personification of its negative character. The passage from  
 the Lord's  
 Prayer relates the Shadow to religion, with irony in the attribution.  
 Next the  
 response about the length of life relates it to the burden of life.  
 Lastly the  
 Lord's Prayer again relates the Shadow to the Kingdom that is  
 so hard. This  
 repetition follows the conflict of the series that produces life  
 itself,  
 frustrating the essence from descent to being. This is the essential  
 irony of  
 their impaired lives. The end comes by way of ironic completion as the  
 nursery  
 rhyme again takes up its repetitive round, and terminates with the line  
 that  
 characterizes the evasive excuse. They are the whimpers of fear with  
 which the  
 hollow men end, neither the bang of Guy Fawkes day nor the "lost  
 violent  
 soul."(8)

In part Five the frustration of reality is described by the abstractions introduced in Part I; life is frustrated at every level, and this accounts for the nature of the land and the character of its people. By placing God in a casual relation to this condition, the poem develops an irony which results in the "whimper". But the most devastating irony is formal: the extension of game ritual in liturgical form.(9)

1  
Ian Hamilton (ed.) The  
Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century  
poetry p.148

2  
Peter Ackroyd:  
T.  
S. Eliot

p.98

3  
ibid  
p.99

4  
Hugh Kenner:

The Invisible poet &ndash; T. S. Eliot

p.65

5  
ibid  
p.66

6  
Peter Ackroyd:  
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7  
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8  
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9  
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