

T.S.Eliot's *The Hollow Men*: An Analytical Reading

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Introduction

Literature mirrors real-life situations, stories, issues, history, and even philosophy. One of the most philosophical tackled concepts in literature is "the question of human's existence". Literature and philosophy share many ideas in common, despite their differences. The intellectual movement of the 20th century is Existentialism, which is European philosophy, distinguished by its emphasis on human existence. The pioneers of this philosophy focused on the individual's freedom and choice. Jane Paul Sartre asserts that "Man is free but this freedom makes him responsible for the conditions he has put himself in as a result of his choice. So he becomes what he makes of himself; either he remains a common individual or finds himself a place among the stars." The prevalent theme in almost all literary works is the meaninglessness of life and the sense of loss and despair that every modern individual suffers from. It is a scholarly axiom that the predicament of the modern man is the psychological conflict in the materialistic and mechanical world.

1. The concept of existence

T.S Eliot is a notable poet who tackles the core of human existence. In almost all his poems Eliot presents lost, depressed, and devastated characters who struggle to survive in the modern age. He is very much concerned with the predicament of a man who sways between two edges i.e. life&death specifically in his famous poem "The Hollow Men". The persona conveys the terrible reality of the lost generation after the world had become an infernal place, leaving no traces of hope, humanity, and stable life. "The Hollow Men" is a clear reflection of the existential theme in the sense that the souls of the characters are standing in limbo, the place in-between that separates paradise and hell namely purgatory. The poet suggests the life on earth which is meaningless and the life after death in which the hollow men are also suffering as if the crux of meaningful existence is unattainable in both life and after death.

We are the stuffed men...

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

Our dried voices, when

We whisper together

Are quiet and meaningless .

The hollow men represent the modern man who has lost track of life and suffers from alienation, emotional emptiness, and loneliness. The war affected individual's life to the extent they are experiencing the meaninglessness

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of life. All the hollow men are identical and a replica of each other as if Eliot suggests that the whole generation suffers the same.

Shape without form, shade without colour,

Paralysed force, gesture without motion .

The lines above describe the paralyzed state of the motionless men. The negative influence of industrialization caused men who were not productive and their lives were barren and sterile. After the industrial and technological advancement the sense of loss, ambivalent, and shaken values increased deeply they did not even endeavor to seek the light that may enlighten their spiritual life. At the hour when we are

Trembling with tenderness

Lips that would kiss

Form prayers to broken stone.

The men are fated and crippled without free will to determine what they want or reject since they are detached from the earthly passion. Even in the life after death, those hollow men are neither in the inferno nor in heaven. Whether in life or death, the existence of hollow men remains questionable. The reason behind the hollowness of men is their physical and spiritual emptiness that caused their in-between existence and eventually to their doom.

2. The Use of Allusions

T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Hollow Men" stands for Modernist poetry in several ways. First, Modernist poetry tends to be shorter than the poetry of previous eras, more self-contained, and more open to interpretation. Eliot employs very short lines in "The Hollow Men" and breaks it into short sections. The poem leaves room for many interpretations because of its complexity and use of allusions, among other literary devices. Thus, it is not easy to understand what Eliot means by "we", or "I", and other references in the poem. Eliot's poetry is famous for its various allusions as he constantly uses literary, religious, or even historical allusions throughout his poems. Allusion enables modernist writers to go back to literary history and to bring into focus the importance of the connection between the past and the present. Allusion is a crucial aspect of Eliot's poetry as well as his personal life as a poet. Despite how Eliot employs allusions in his poems, he also uses them to express his deepest feelings. (Moody 180)

J. A. Cuddon defines "Tradition" as "the inherited past which is available for the writer to study and learn from. Thus, the writer's native language, literary forms, codes, devices, conventions and various cultures from the past." (730) Thus, Eliot stresses on this idea of tradition in his poetry through the use of allusions to link the literary history of the past with his modern poetry. Therefore, authors begin with tradition and then they modify that tradition in a specific way to get their message crossed. Eliot saw literary tradition as something evolving and transforming over time. He believed that the past informed and brightened the present and that individual writers became a part of and transformed that tradition if they could create "the new work of art." (Castle 23) Eliot emphasizes that writers or poets must develop a sense of the past and seek to examine their work in its relation and connectedness to the works of the writers or the poets of the past:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. [...] It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (Eliot 47)

Hence, Eliot employs allusions in his poetry to link the tradition of the past with the modern age by referring to lines from different literary texts that belong to different eras. In his poem "The Hollow Men", he brings together two entirely different allusions to make the epigraph of the poem and make it appear as two connected sentences: "Mistah Kurtz—he dead. / A penny for the Old Guy." (Eliot 77-87) The two sentences come from two entirely different works that belong to different centuries and are different in their details, yet they play a significant role in the poem's apprehension. The first part of the epigraph is taken from Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, which says "Mistah Kurtz—he dead." (*Heart of Darkness* 87) The second part of the epigraph, "A Penny for the Old Guy", comes from a historical rather than literary context. It refers to a person named Guy Fawkes, who attempted to blow up the English Houses of Parliament in 1605. Today, November 5 is a celebration day of Guy Fawkes Night in the United Kingdom and a straw-man effigy of Fawkes is burned at the bonfire. (Murphy, 222) Thus, this image of straw men and their deaths is central to Eliot's poem.

Moreover, the "hollow men" in Eliot's poem are those who either made the wrong choice or those who have not been able to choose at all. The ones who cannot choose are the souls who are unacceptable both in Heaven and Hell because of their incapacity to act. They are neither condemned nor redeemed. They wander in a state which is a kind of death-in-life. Eliot states that these hollow men dare not look at those who can choose and take action: "Eyes I dare not meet in dreams / In death's dream kingdom." (Eliot lines 19-20) Here, the death's dream kingdom is the wasteland or the modern society they live in. They are further described as having "Shape without form, shade without color, / Paralyzed force, gesture without motion." (Eliot lines 11-12) The hollow men, thus, are just like Kurtz and Guy Fawkes in their state of hollowness and isolation. Eliot uses these allusions to give a vivid image of an utterly degraded scenery of modern society, in which there is a lack of spirituality, rootlessness, isolation, and desolation of urban life. This modern society renders modern men hollow, or better yet, dead in life.

The river is central in both Eliot's poem and Conrad's novel in the sense that it becomes the testing ground for man to arrive at the center of darkness and to discover the self. In "The Hollow Men", the souls who talk to us are also "Gathered on this beach of the tumid river;" (Eliot line 62) And like the characters in Conrad's novel, the hollow men do not go on a spiritual journey, because they do not cross the river that isolates them from knowledge. They stay on the banks, hence unable to neither redeem nor condemn themselves, like Kurtz.

The other important allusion in Eliot's epigraph is "A Penny for the Old Guy," referring to the historical figure of Guy Fawkes. (Castle 27) This allusion creates an image of men devoid of individual strength. The effigy is identified with the hollow men, who are also described by Eliot as "stuffed men" in line 2, and "Headpiece filled with straw" in line 4. However, a distinction can be made regarding the figure of Guy Fawkes, for he did act and choose even though it was done in violence, unlike these hollow men, and Kurtz. This dichotomy is an example of the complex allusions that Eliot creates in his poems. However, like Kurtz who is referred to as "hollow at the core" (*Heart of Darkness* 74), Fawkes is remembered as an empty figure, a scarecrow.

However, what is more important in the poem is the connection with Dante, as the images of *The Divine Comedy* can be seen throughout the poem, which reflects Eliot's influence on Dante. The hollow men in Eliot's poem are similar to the crowd of the uncommitted in Canto III of Dante's "Inferno". The "Multifoliate rose" in line alludes to Dante's vision of the court of heaven in the form of a Rose in the "Paradiso". Further, the "eyes" of Eliot's poem allude to awareness of eyes and sight throughout the "Purgatorio" in which Dante encounters Beatrice's eyes. (Scofield, 2003).

The use of allusions is extremely effective; allusions link this new tale with all of those old tales, implying that it is a part of those stories; additionally, the many allusions that appear in The poem are of mutable viewpoints, exactly like cubism in photography, the extension is often achieved by allusions. The use of allusions makes it impossible for the reader to understand the poem; the ambiguity is meant to demonstrate the complexities of today's culture. Allusion evokes two types of feelings: belonging when the allusion is recognized and exclusion when the allusion is not recognized. Eliot uses allusion to open up the context, which is accurate for some readers, but it shuts down the

meaning for many more due to their inability to understand these allusions. Furthermore, allusions are used to indicate parallels or contrasts between the past and the present, implying that life has been consistent throughout history. Eliot values the classical and identifies himself as a classicist, so he put the poem among the giants and great works by Virgil, Seneca, Dante and many others.

3. The Concept of Time

"Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) in which he emphasized the pivotal role of the classical writers who enriched literature all over the world by leaving us legacies to be read and well comprehended. Eliot in his article believes in intertwining the past and the present together and the importance of frequent reference to these classics in his poem not only in the Epigraphs but also, in the body of the poem for example Hamlet in *The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock* and other innumerable examples. "This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal T. S. Eliot and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity" (Eliot)

He believes that when mixing tradition and modernity together might be of good use in the sense that the modern writers may revive the great classical works by adding modern flavor to these traditional works. Eliot sees the present as a continuation to the past and writers won't be able to write any literary work without referring to the past literary works that enrich and support modern literary works. In addition, he uses the past to enrich the present, on other words, he revives the past in modern context. Sometimes the use of the epigraph seems obscure, but later on, as Matthiessen notes in *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, "an epigraph may illuminate a whole poem, and it is itself designed to form an integral part of the effect of the poem (Matthiessen 52).

4. Conclusion

Eliot addresses his audience to instill in them the notion that everything in this world, and even the previous world, which is not productive is a wasteland. Everything is sterile, empty, and meaningless; life for him is merely mirage. Individuals have been abused and been moved according to people's desires and emotions, rather than their feelings. "The Hollow Men" encapsulates the sense of devastation, spiritual loss, and delusional activities of a post-World War I society. He uses decayed and lifeless images to portray the hollow existence of these individuals, who lack purpose, emotion, and connection. The poem is fragmented and gloomy which mirror the fragmentation and disillusionment of the post-war world." *The Hollow Men* embodies the modernist genre, capturing the sense of alienation and existential angst prevailing in society. It reflects a loss of faith, both in traditional values and in the ability of humanity to find meaning and purpose in life.

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