
“The Hollow Men” (1925), an Exploration of the Spiritual Bankruptcy of the Modern Men

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Abstract

After the publication of “The Waste Land”, Eliot felt the urge to move towards a new form, style and subject matter which would be quite unlike “The Waste Land”. But “The Hollow Men”, which was composed after “The Waste Land” does not mark a radical departure from either the thematic or the stylistic concepts of the earlier poem. In reality, it presents the spiritual and emotional bankruptcy of the modern men witnessing the meaningless manslaughter of the World War I. The whole poem is permeated by the sense of guilt, anguish, helplessness and sterility. The modern man is devoid of spirituality, love and emotion. Their helplessness is enhanced by their inability to communicate with others. The two epigraphs of the poem are significant as they convey the message of the emotional and spiritual sterility of the modern hollow men who act as Mr. Kurtz of “The Heart of Darkness” written by Conrad. The sense of segregation and alienation, the emptiness and sterility is portrayed effectively by the style and language of the poem. The broken lines, repetition, the distortion of the nursery rhyme, the inability to utter prayer highlight the inability of the modern men to describe their psychological condition in an effective way which is indicative of their spiritual barrenness. The cactus land as described in the third stanza of the poem is indicative of the lifelessness of its inhabitants. Actually, the hollow men of the poem represent the modern man inhabiting the post-war world, deeply wounded by the futility of war, the meaningless destruction of war, the innumerable death of war. They are in a vegetative state of mind not being able to move towards any positive direction.

KEYWORDS: Hollow men, Modern men, Spiritual barrenness, War

INTRODUCTION

“The Hollow Men” was written by T. S. Eliot in 1925 after the epoch-making “The Waste Land”. Though Eliot vouched his wish to move from the thematic and stylistic features predominant in “The Waste Land” in his successive poems, actually the same theme and poetic style was being repeated in “The Hollow Men” which dealt with the inertia and spiritual barrenness of the modern people. The poem, which is divided into five segments, delineates the predicament of the modern men who try helplessly to fill their lives with something meaningful and constructive. They try to pray, sing or dance. But their inertia and emotional sterility make all their efforts futile and fruitless. The efforts and the results prove the helplessness of the modern men who try to

imitate the men from the past who had lived their lives full with determination, purposefulness and positivity. This paper tries to throw light on the miserable predicament of the modern men who in spite of their appearance of human beings are nothing but 'stuffed men'.

METHODOLOGY

For writing this research paper, Qualitative Textual analysis has been used. While textual analysis refers to a data-gathering process for interpreting textual data, the qualitative methodology refers to the judgment of the structure and content of a text.

DISCUSSION

"The Hollow Men" starts with two epigraphs, both reminding the readers of men who in spite of moral degradation and corruption were full of vitality. The first epigraph "Mistah Kurtz – he dead" is a quote from Joseph Conrad's novel "Heart of Darkness" referring to the death of Kurtz— a white trader who, in spite of his initial intention of enlightening Africa, turns out to be a corrupt demigod reigning over the natives. The second epigraph, "A penny for the Old Guy" refers to Guy Fawkes, a Catholic, who tried to end the Protestant monarchy of King James I by blowing up the Parliament. His plans being discovered, Fawkes was executed on November 5. This event is observed every year on 5 November by burning the effigies of Fawkes. So, the two epigraphs show two power hungry corrupt souls who had vitality and mental strength to execute their planning however cruel they might be. The epigraphs are important to understand the poem. Mariwan Barzinji, in his article "The Function of Epigraphs to T. S. Eliot's Poetry", explains how and why the epigraphs are important in the poems of T. S. Eliot and also clearly states that without understanding the epigraph in each single poem of Eliot, it is hard to understand the whole poem. These two allusions are actually a clear contrast to the modern hollow men who lack the will and the determination to execute anything definite.

"The Hollow Men" is a comprehensive and complex poem needing interpretation. Actually, this poem is delineating the state of the modern people who are suffering from the curse of emotional and spiritual hollowness. The post World War world has hit the modern men hard by extracting their vitality, making them grope together without any positive direction of spending their life. Their life is merely an existence, which is in-between — they lack the energy to do something good and the courage to do evil. The moral and spiritual condition of the hollow men parallels that of the lost souls described by Dante in *Inferno iii*. These souls did neither good nor evil during their life and were never spiritually alive. The hollow men resemble these lost spirits. If the poem is scrutinised at a more close level, it can be seen that Eliot is identifying himself as a representative of these hollow men as from the very first line, he has used

first person terms like 'we' and 'I'. The psychological conditions of lacking hope, joy or pain is felt not by some indeterminate population but by each and every member of the modern society.

The Hollow Men is fundamentally a poem of Eliot's self assessment. He easily identifies himself as one of the lost soul, hovering between good and evil, lacking the energy and vigour of choosing any one. The entire poem, segmented into five parts, clearly and explicitly delineates the pathetic bankruptcy of the spirit of the hollow men. In the first section of the poem, the hollow men, leaning together like scarecrows, are described. Their voice, their 'headpiece', their emotion— all are dry and lifeless. Their existence lacks vitality, making their force paralysed and their gesture motionless. They are living in a world which resembles hell but even at that place, the hollow men lack the determination and courage to enter the actual Hell. They are to be remembered by the people with determination as the stuffed men who, though keeping up the human appearance, are actually devoid of all human qualities.

Speaking of the hollow men in the second stanza, Eliot identifies himself as one of the hollow men — a true representative lacking the courage to face the eyes of them who had lived a life of purpose and decision. The hollow men, incapable of taking any action and who are absolutely devoid of spiritual faith and mental strength try their best to avoid the eyes of those who had made it to "death's dream kingdom". In shame and in order to avoid the gaze of the persons with determination, they try to hide themselves in a deliberate disguise wearing rat's coat and crowskin. Lacking self-will, they easily behave *as the wind behaves*.

The third stanza describes the cactus land where the hollow men reside. The barren, desolate country represents a world where life is just drifting without any purpose or goal. Scattered with lifeless broken stone images, the hollow men appeal for Salvation with a *dead man's hand, which* makes their plea worthless. Even in moments of sensual passion, they cannot unite. Loneliness has spelt such a curse upon them that even when they try to kiss their frustrated love and sensuality only lead them to utter broken prayers. Even love, the most pure and passionate of all feelings have become dry, empty and hollow. The arid setting highlights the dead emptiness which Eliot considers as the pith of an age 'without religious faith'.

In the fourth stanza of the poem, Eliot shows the tremendous influence of Dante on him. In the great medieval poem, *The Divine Comedy* Dante describes the lost souls as intermediates who are denied entry in either hell or heaven, as they possess neither evil nor good traits. In fact the entire fourth stanza is replete with allusions from *The Divine Comedy*. The perpetual star, the multifoliate rose, the sightless souls are direct reference from Dante, which parallel the world of the hollow men with that of the lost souls described in *Inferno*. In *The Divine Comedy*, *paradise* is imagined as a multifoliate

rose whose many layered petals are made up of saints, angels and Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. Similarly, the perpetual star refers to God himself who remains constant in showing the path of Salvation to the devout and pious souls. The star and the rose appear in “death’s twilight kingdom” making the hollow men hopeful that the eyes reappearing will enable them to see the path of Salvation. Otherwise, they are destined to grope together in the valley of dying stars. Though they are physically near, spiritually they are distant from each other altogether, thereby making themselves extremely vulnerable. They grope together in the banks of the “tumid river” which is like Acheron of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. The river is swollen, in contrast to the aridity of the cactus land and the dryness of the men. As no-one has come across to rescue these unfortunate souls, they are stranded, unable even to reach hell. Their only hope is that the heavenly eyes will come back as a perpetual star unlike the fading one which is illusionary. The dying star, the perpetual star, the multifoliate rose, the eyes— all denote the sad fact that the hollow men are such dried up in spirituality that they cannot help themselves to achieve Salvation but to remain in search for outward help.

The fifth and final section of the poem begins with the distorted version of a nursery rhyme. Whereas the original rhyme “Here we go round the mulberry bush” symbolizes fruition and new life, the hollow men replaces it by a symbol of sterility and decay with the inclusion of the ‘prickly pear’ with the specification of time— 5 o’ clock in the morning. It is the traditional time of Christ's Resurrection but the hollow men, being totally bankrupt regarding spirituality, recite foolishly the nursery rhyme, signifying their futile existence. They are prevented by some mysterious shadow to exert their will power thus making creation and response, which need some type of force and vitality, unreachable to them. Actually the fifth section of *The Hollow Men* is akin to an incantatory conclusion to the poem. As if some sort of shadow keeps the conception and the creation of the hollow men apart. It thwarts their creative powers and thereby leading to the inglorious death. These denizens of a spiritually dried up modern waste land die ingloriously. They are deprived of the honour of a catastrophe (symbolised by the word ‘bang’) but with the frustrated cry of a helpless being. In this final section, the spiritual depravity of the hollow men is further stressed out by their inability to recite the Lord's Prayer in a correct way. “For thine is the kingdom” was recited by Christ as a model of how to pray but it remains inaccessible to the hollow men. Their attempt to utter it is muffled by the broken apprehension of the dreariness of life.

“The Hollow Men” can be represented as an aftereffect of the First World War. Not only Eliot but the greater part of the European authors got a tremendous emotional upheaval after the four long years which shook the base of human civilization. Earnest Hemingway, in his *Men at War*, said, *There was no really good true war book during*

the entire four years of the war. The only true writing that came through during the war was in poetry. One reason for this is that poets are not arrested as quickly as prose writers.

World War I hit Europe tremendously, making it a pool of despair, death and destruction. The literature that emerged out of it was pungent and acrid. “The Hollow Men” is no exception, portraying faithfully the picture of the then Europe and the society— devoid of morality, spirituality and emotions. These depravities are what make them hollow. They are inwardly vacant but keep up the outward human appearance with the help of stuffing. But this very stuffing has relegated them to the position of a scarecrow. They are dehumanizing themselves willingly by deliberately putting on rat's coat, crow skin etc. Their urge to disguise themselves proves the fact that the meaningless destruction of the War has left the hollow men with vegetative state of mind with no energy to actualize their intentions and actions. Their voices are ‘dried’ — as meaningless as wind in dry grass because wind cannot affect dry grass. They are ‘shape without form’ meaning in spite of having a human body, the hollow men lack the spirituality or feelings that makes a human being complete. The habitat of the hollow men also compliments their depravity of energy and activity . The cactus land full of broken stone statues present a desolate landscape of despair and scarcity where the inhabitants are left to appeal for Salvation through dead hand symbolizing the worthless life of the unfortunate souls. They are deprived of the capability of expressing love— a pure and uplifting emotion too. Instead of kissing even while trembling with passion, they begin to utter broken muffled prayers. Waiting for some miraculous being to rescue them, they wait helplessly, grouping together, searching in the darkness for the right path. And their search ends with their inglorious ending that bears no great significance but resembles the feeble ending of cry of an infant.

CONCLUSIONS

The First World War wrecked the world to a great extent. The things and events normal prior to the War lost their significance. Things never thought out to happen became normal. Human beings lost their intrinsic value by being psychologically empty. Human civilization lost its idea of progression or development by being infected with the dead souls taking shelter in living corpses. The War had relegated the human civilization to such a nonsensical position that the ending of civilization is imagined as a feeble cry of a baby whereas earlier a clear picture of loud bangs came to the mind spontaneously. An article by Joseph Jonghyun Jeon points out the fact that ‘The Hollow Men’ portrays the psychological conflicts between the political and artistic point of view of T. S. Eliot himself. Throughout the entire poem, the hollow men are shown to be aware of their physical existence only. Their psychological depravities do not seem to bother them at all. But their present spiritual barrenness

was not their inborn feature. Their headpieces are filled with straw which is now dry and rough but was once green— full of life and vigour. So, obliquely it has been hinted that once the spiritually dead were beaming with life. The changed socio-political scenario has evolved them to something subhuman. Though “The Hollow Men” has said nothing new which has not been told poignantly and pungently in “The Waste Land”, yet this poem remains noteworthy. It speaks to a different option for both: it acknowledges neither the old nor the new naturalism, however super-naturalism (Waggoner, 1943). And with the hope that people, while waiting beside the tumid river, will eventually mix up with one another, Eliot paints a somewhat silver lining which is an optimistic sign altogether.

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