

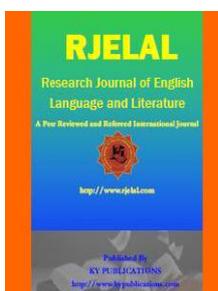


## “THE HOLLOW MEN”—A POSTMODERN READING

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### ABSTRACT

The epoch making Modernist Movement reached its zenith during 1910-1930. Gradually, its radiance and eminence declined due to the political and economic crisis of the 1930s. Chronologically, Postmodernism laid its imprints upon various fields of study and thereby providing a new dimension to them. It is a Janus-faced ideology in the sense that it is partly a continuation and partly repudiation from Modernism. Thomas Stearns Eliot's "The Hollow Men" is assembled from fragments which exhibit the hollow nature of the present generation human beings. Published in 1925, "The Hollow Men" is considered one of the popular Modernist poems of Eliot. This paper focuses on the Postmodernist features, like intertextuality, allusion, parody, juxtaposition, fragmentation, ambiguity, and use of mini-narratives instead of grand narratives. In a nut-shell, this article aims to establish "The Hollow Men" as a Postmodern poem marked by the criss-cross of Postmodern theories.

Key words: Modern, Postmodern, Intertextuality, Allusion, Juxtaposition, Parody

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### INTRODUCTION

A classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-catholic in religion, Thomas Stearns Eliot holds an honorable position in the history of English Literature. Some of his best known poems are "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Gerontion," *The Waste Land*, "The Hollow Men," "Ash Wednesday," and *Four Quartets*. Born in 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri, Eliot always wanted to return to the epicentre of Anglo-Saxon culture. He started residing in England from 1914, the year of the beginning of World War I. It was the high time for the Modernist leaders, as they dominated the entire literary scene. Ezra Pound, Eliot's mentor, was one of the prominent leaders of the Modernist Movement. The modernist leaders showed a new path by rejecting the age-old traditions, dogmas, and literary forms that were practised in the society for a long period. Being one of the iconic figures of

Modernism, Eliot's poems reveal the traits of Modernism. Published in the year 1925, "The Hollow Men" is considered as one of the popular poems of Eliot, which exhibits the features of Modernism.

One of the major characteristics of Modernism is the use of images. Image is a device used in Modernist art. Eliot's poems are replete with images taken from different sources. It is through these images that Eliot expresses the predicament of the modern man. Hyatt Howe Waggoner in his article, "T. S. Eliot and The Hollow Men" presents most of Eliot's characters as hollow men residing in a wasteland. They are so hollow that they measure their lives with coffee spoons as referred to in "The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock". They know that neither fear nor courage can save them as they are afraid of handful of dust (Waggoner 120-121). In the poem, "The Hollow Men" we find an epigraph which is related to the death of Kurtz. It reminds us of

Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*. In this novel, Marlow, the narrator, narrates his journey up the River Congo with the description of various images, and these images of "journey" correspond to Dante's journey to Inferno. This poem is also replete with the images of Dante's description of Hell. Eliot provides a vivid description of hollow men as "stuffed men" (I.2), "Headpiece filled with straw" (I.4). They are like immobile corpses with death-in-life existence. The hollow men have a similar image to that of a scarecrow:

Let me also wear  
Such deliberate disguises:  
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed  
staves  
In a field (II.31-34)

The above lines suggest that both hollow men and the scarecrow used in the fields are immobile, inanimate figures filled with straw and unable to respond to others. As a modern artist, Eliot has an innovative and experimental thought in his mind. He makes a structural repetition in the poem, "The Hollow Men" in order to reinforce the mental stratum, existence, and states of hollow men. This feature of structural repetition and word repetition is found in most of the sub-sections of the poem. The examples of structural repetition found in the poem are "behaving as the wind behaves" (II.35), "We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men" (I.1-2), "This is the dead land, / This is the cactus land" (III.39-40), "The eyes are not here, / There are no eyes here" (IV.52-53). Even the repetition of the words like "eyes" and "voices" are also found here. Eliot also uses the device of repetition through negation in order to emphasize the expression of sorrow and guilt. The hollow men are the residents of modern civilization. Modern civilization is complex and its complexity is revealed through the representation of the psychic state and activities of modern men like hollow men. They are so inactive and spiritually arid that their voices cannot be heard by others. Their "dried voices" are also meaningless and quiet. They hide their complex nature in deliberate disguises as mentioned in line 32 of the poem. Not only these; other elements of Modernism which include pastiche, distortion of forms,

dislocation of grammar, etc. are also found in Eliot's poems.

Modernism gradually lost its radiance as a result of the political and economic crisis of 1930s. Chronologically, the evacuated place of Modernism was occupied by Postmodernism. The concept of Modernism can be explained with the metaphor of the trunk and branch of a tree whereas Postmodernism can be explained with the metaphor of a rhizome. The nature of Modernism can be interpreted as hierarchial, organized, and centralized. Like rhizomes which flow in various directions to constitute a network of multiplicities (Woods 32), Postmodernism is also disjointed, dispersed and a-centred in nature. Postmodernism is a Janus faced ideology, in the sense that it is partly a continuation of and partly a departure from Modernism.

#### Characteristics of Postmodernism

Postmodern art favours certain features like intertextuality, allusion, parody, juxtaposition, fragmentation, ambiguity, and demise of grand narratives. Eliot, one of the high priests of Modernism, also exhibits prominently the features of Postmodernism in his poems. This section gives a detailed analysis of the above mentioned Postmodern attributes in Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men".

One of the major attributes of Postmodernism is the use of intertextuality. The term "intertextuality" was coined by Julia Kristeva. Each and every text is an adaptation of other texts; this observation opens up a new horizon. Intertextuality is considered as an umbrella term which includes the echoing of a text into another. Many critics think that "intertextuality" is just a new name for the age-old literary terms like allusion and reference. It cannot be limited to either of the literary terms. Intertextuality also includes a device like epigraph (Nasi 4-6). Most of the epigraphs in Eliot's poems are in foreign languages which creates a linguistic estrangement. The readers also notice a linguistic distance in some of the epigraphs which are in English. The poem "The Hollow Men" has two epigraphs—one from Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* and the other refers to the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Eliot establishes a parallelism between

the epigraphs and the main theme of the poem. One of the epigraphs to "The Hollow Men"—"Mistah Kurtz—he dead"—is a quotation from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The quotation echoes the speech of Kurtz's African slave. Probably, Kurtz represents a true hollow man as he lacks a soul. Like Kurtz, the hollow men also fail to do their activities with vehemence. They are unable to perform impulsive activities as their heads are filled with straw and their dried voices are quiet and meaningless. Eliot uses another epigraph, "A penny for the Old Guy" which is a quotation from the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. The quotation used as epigraph is a cry made by the children in order to buy fireworks for celebrating the Guy Fawkes Day. This epigraph harks back to such violent people who believe in their own task, however horrific its effects are. It establishes a natural contrast to the hollowness of the present generation people who fundamentally believe in nothing and are, therefore, empty at the core of their being, like a Guy Fawkes dummy. He lacks a real body as the children prepare effigies of Guy Fawkes. Eliot through these epigraphs shows the spiritual and physical barrenness of present generation human beings.

One of the important features of Postmodernism is the use of allusions. Eliot foregrounds his own thoughts by the use of allusions. Eliot alludes to Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness* in the epigraph of the poem, "The Hollow Men". The story of Conrad's novel goes like this. Marlow, the narrator of the novel, had gone to Africa in order to rescue the European ivory trader Kurtz. Kurtz came to Africa with a mission to educate and enlighten the primitive, unsophisticated, unrefined people with the knowledge of modern civilization. Ironically, he considers himself a god among the Africans, but Marlow knows that he is hollow at the core. He surrenders himself to the primitive impulses and unspeakable rites of Africans. In Eliot's poem, hollow men are incapable of performing any activity. They cannot even talk loudly as they are stuffed with straw. The line 10 of the poem "in our dry cellar" alludes to Guyfawkes and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. The conspirators of the Gunpowder Plot rented a cellar to accumulate gunpowder there, so that they could use it for

explosion. The news of the plot was earlier revealed by one of the conspirators and their efforts of blowing up the Parliament, King James I, his queen, and his oldest son went futile. Fawkes was caught red-handed from the cellar. He was tortured extremely to disclose the names of the co-conspirators. Finally, some of the conspirators were killed while resisting arrest, and others were tried and executed. In the poem "The Hollow Men," we can observe that the hollow men are not so courageous to respond violently and vigorously like the conspirators of the Gunpowder Plot. The allusion to Dante's *Inferno* iii is found in the first part of the poem "The Hollow Men." Eliot compares the hollow men with the souls that reside in hell without blame and praise:

Shape without form, shade without colour,  
Paralyzed force, gestures without motion;  
(l.11-12)

The moral and spiritual condition of the hollow men is similar to that of the souls in *Inferno* iii. These souls never actively choose between good and evil. They always mingle themselves with those angels who are neither rebellious nor faithful to God during the time of Satan's revolt. They are expelled both from hell and heaven and therefore they have no hope of death. The condition of the hollow men corresponds to these souls as they have death-in-life existence. Eliot again provides us with the description of the hollow men and the damned souls in the hell:

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 (l.13-18)

These lines allude to Dante's *Inferno* as well as *Purgatorio*. The damned, violent, lost souls like Guyfawkes and Kurtz have to cross the river Acheron in order to reach hell with the help of the demon Charon. Some of these lines also refer to the last cantos of *Purgatorio*. Dante is unable to look into Beatrice's eyes directly for his past sins. He, after shedding the penitential tears, crosses the river Lethe and gets cleansed in the water of the river Eunoe. Being purged of his past sins, he finally

renews his journey towards Paradise. The hollow men are unable to purge their sins and therefore, they prefer to live in a state as they are. Eliot also alludes to Dante's *Purgatorio* xxx in order to show Dante's encounter with Beatrice in "Not that final meeting/ In the twilight kingdom" (II.37-38). The meeting of Dante with Beatrice suggests both dread and desire—at the same time the speaker scrutinizes his inadequacy as well as acknowledges it to be the only hope of salvation respectively. It suggests both resistance and desire. The "broken jaw of our lost kingdom" (IV.56) alludes to the biblical story of Samson, who killed thousand Phillistines with a new jawbone of an ass. Samson felt thirsty and at the same time God created a hollow place in the jaw from which water came out. Samson quenched his thirst by drinking the water and his spirit was revived. This indicates the spiritual wholeness of Samson but the hollow men are devoid of such spirituality. The poem ends with "Not with a bang but a whimper" (V.98). Eliot here uses an allusion signifying the failure of the Gunpowder plot which corresponds to the failure of the hollow men.

Parody is another prime aspect of Postmodernism. The postmodernists are frivolous like Nero. Eliot uses the element of parody in his poem, "The Hollow Men." Eliot uses a major degree of reference of one text to another—a postmodern attribute. He makes a parody of the twilight scene mentioned in *Purgatorio* viii. Dante gives a vivid description of the twilight scene where he sees one of the penitential spirits making a fervent plea to God by joining and raising both palms as if singing a hymn. Eliot makes a parody of the situation by showing that the stone images can only receive the supplication of the hollow men. He also parodies the nursery rhyme to suggest that the hollow men indulge them in a child-like behaviour without developing the qualities of children. In normal circumstances, the children's nursery rhyme refers to "Mulberry bush," an image of fertility but it has been replaced by "prickly pear" (V.68) which signifies infertility and sterility of the hollow men. The speaker of the poem, "The Hollow Men" indulges himself in self- mockery with the help of parody and the form of the nursery rhyme. It is the

parody which combines the nursery rhyme with the phrase "world without end" from the prayer: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end, Amen." (qtd. in Jain 210).

Juxtaposition is another device of Postmodernism. Literary work has become a patch work as it includes pastiche, collage, montage, and contrast between the grand past and the trivial present. Eliot presents a contrast between Guy Fawkes and the hollow men in his poem, "The Hollow Men." Guy Fawkes was one of the conspirators of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. He was arrested from the cellar where they had collected the gunpowder for explosion. The conspirators had planned to explode the Parliament and take away the lives of King James I, his queen, and his oldest son. All their efforts to destroy the monarchy went in vain as the news of the conspiracy was disclosed by one of the conspirators. The conspirators acted violently, but the hollow men are unable to plan and execute such activity as they are stuffed with straw. Here lies the difference between the present day human beings and those at the time of monarchical rule. As mentioned in the last cantos of *Purgatorio*, Dante was unable to look into Beatrice' eyes directly. He confessed and repented for his past sins and finally he crossed the river Lethe and the river Eunoe. Then he renewed his journey towards Paradise. Eliot here shows a striking contrast between the hollow men who are incapable of purging themselves of their past sins and Dante who has the potential to transform himself in order to face Beatrice in Paradise. In lines 55-56 of the poem, Eliot alludes to the biblical character, Samson who can kill thousands of Phillistines with a new jawbone of an ass. God has created a hollow place inside the jaw from which water comes out. Samson quenches his thirst by drinking water which comes out of the jaw in order to revive his own spirit. Eliot makes a contrast between the brave, courageous Samson and the coward, corpse-like, immobile hollow men. In section I of the poem Eliot uses "Those who have crossed / With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom" (I.13-14) to show a contrast. These lines suggest a contrast between the vision of spirituality

which has been achieved through repentance and prayer and the sightless eyes of the unredeemed life. Daniel J. McConnell in his article ““Heart of Darkness” in T. S. Eliot’s *The Hollow Men*” presents a contrast between two kingdoms of man’s spiritual state—kingdom of death and “death’s other kingdom” (I.14) as mentioned in the poem (McConnell 148-149). The former is such a kingdom which is ruled by Kurtz and characterized by the dried voices of hollow men whereas the later is ruled by God and Providence and characterized by singing voices and the “eyes” of “sunlight on a broken column” (II.23). Eliot focuses on the contrast between the hollow men and the grand characters of the past in order to show that present generation people prefer to live in a dreamy, frozen, and unreal world.

Postmodern art celebrates the notion of fragmentation. The title of the poem, “*The Hollow Men*” is a combination of two words taken from two different texts—“*The Hollow Land*,” a romance by William Morris and a poem “*The Broken Men*” by Rudyard Kipling. The above-mentioned poem of Kipling inspires Eliot to choose a title like “*The Hollow Men*.” Both the poems share the same sense of failure and exile. The aspect of fragmentation is displayed in the poem through the following lines: “rat’s feet over the broken glass in our dry cellar” (I.9), “sunlight on a broken column” (II.23), “form prayers to broken stone” (III.51), “broken jaw of our lost kingdom” (IV.56). The phrase “broken” in each of the quoted lines gives us an indication of distortion, lack of wholeness. The hollow men are so spiritually arid that they recite prayers only for the broken stone images. Eliot presents the broken lines:

For Thine is  
Life is  
For Thine is the (V.92-94)

The incomplete, broken, fragmented lines suggest the hollow men’s failure to utter Lord’s Prayer. Eliot through the element of fragmentation shows the fragmented existence of the present-day human beings.

Ambiguity is one of the traits of Postmodern art. “The hope only / Of empty men” (IV.66-67) used by Eliot in his poem, “*The Hollow Men*” is

ambiguous in its sense. There may be a possibility that the eyes are the only hope of salvation for the hollow men. There is a play upon the meaning of the phrase “empty men” as “there is a hope for them only if they empty themselves of love of created beings” (qtd. in Jain 208). There lies an ambiguity because of the incomplete, broken, fragmented line. It signifies “either the sole hope of empty men, or the hope only of empty men” (qtd. in Jain 208).

Postmodern art favours mini narratives or micro narratives. According to Jean Francois Lyotard, a Postmodern critic, there has been demise of “Grand narratives” or “an incredulity towards meta narratives” (qtd. in Woods 20), and there will be emergence of micro narratives or mini narratives. In the Postmodern world, men have their own stories and narratives; and these are focused in the entire poem, “*The Hollow Men*.” The poem is fraught with the stories of the hollow men who have dried voices, unable to perform activities like Guy Fawkes and Kurtz. They are spiritually dry as they only pray to broken stone images. They are unable to purge their sins like Dante. So, we can see that mini narratives replace the grand narratives, thereby exhibiting one of the elements of Postmodernism.

#### Conclusion

Eliot hangs between both Modernism and Postmodernism as his poems reveal amply features of both Modernism and Postmodernism. We can observe many Postmodern traits like allusion, parody, juxtaposition, fragmentation, ambiguity, and use of mini narratives in Eliot’s poem “*The Hollow Men*.” If we analyse the poem from the perspective of Postmodernism, we can consider it as a Postmodern poem.

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