

## A Study of Dilemma in *The Hollow Men* of T.S. Eliot

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### Abstract:

TS Eliot has towering and dominating personality for he is a pioneer of modernist poetry. Modernist poetry in English started in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the appearance of the Imagists. In common with many other modernists, these poets wrote in reaction to the perceived excesses of Victorian poetry with its emphasis on traditional formalism and ornate diction.

*The Hollow Men* (1925) is a 95 lines profound work of art by modern poet TS Eliot. This poem, which is narrated by one of the hollow men, portrays Eliot's concern for a society and culture lacking in faith, morality and humanity. The society is pervaded by a sense of alienation and the breakdown of communication – both with each other and within their own internal selves. This results in hollow men's loss of purpose and identity.

This fragmentary poem is written in fragments to highlight the chaos of modern existence. Actually, this poem shows the states in which human beings do not have hope or spirituality in them and that is what makes us so hollow from the inside. I think that Eliot is trying to tell us that many humans are not aware of their own identity and that society is lost in the formation of belief and spirituality.

**Key words:** Hollow, Stuffed, Euphoria, Mania, Twilight Kingdom, Death's dream kingdom, Kurtz

### Introduction:

To many of his earliest English readers TS Eliot proved to be a source of suspicion with cosmopolitan affinities, shared in part with his fellow- American Ezra Pound, disquieting to admirers of the Georgian Poetry books. However, while Pound was not to be proved more accommodating. But about TS Eliot the essentials are clear. He was one of the finest poets writing in English in the first half of the twentieth century. He is still emphatically modern. His decisive contributions are the *metric* he established in his first book *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), the *form* he pioneered in *The Waste Land* (1922) and the *content* he attempted in *Four Quartets* (1943). It is no exaggeration to say that, through his *metric*, he gave poetry a new language. His literary criticism is more constantly interesting, challenging and responsible than most on offer in this often tried and overworked area. As a dramatist he is more important for unlikely triumphs, from *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) to the immensely successfully *Cats* derived posthumously from the stolid whimsy of *Old Possum's Book of*

*Practical Cats (1939)*. Eliot acknowledges that poetry emerges from commerce between the old and the new; between tradition and the individual talent. (1)

He has been one of the most daring and innovators of twentieth-century poetry. He never compromises either with the public or indeed with language itself. He has followed his belief that poetry should aim at a representation of the complexities of modern civilization in language and that such representation necessarily leads to difficult poetry. His poem *The Hollow Men* is, undoubtedly, a landmark creation of modern poetry. Eliot wrote this poem at that time when the post-world war was suffering and he began to explore new religious beliefs. Spirituality is an underlying theme that occurs through this amazing poem. Eliot finds that the modern man is hollow from inside.

Before going through this paper, it will be desirable to define the word 'dilemma'. The word dilemma means a difficult situation or problem in which a difficult choice has to be made between two or more alternatives, esp. equally undesirable or unpleasant choice. Eliot has tried to use ethical dilemma in this influential poem. The human values of the human being like wisdom, spirituality (divine quality), and sublime morality based on a staunch faith are nowhere to be found. Modern men's behavior is just like puppets and dolls. The hollow men's efforts to generate collective wisdom and intelligence to promote the cause of humanity have failed miserably. They are given to dream of bright future whereas in reality there is no hope for a better future. Actually modern men have been living in the mania of two mistaken beliefs. First- the scientific developments have made man omnipotent and second- that instant gain is all that matters. In this euphoria, modern men have totally lost balance of judgment. With scientific achievement, they have become so much power drunk that they have stopped thinking about consequences of their impetuous action. Under the existing circumstances, irresponsible individuals keep on repenting for the outcome of their thoughtless misdeeds.

### **Study of dilemma in the Hollow Men:**

The poem *Hollow Men (1925)* is not an appendage to *The Waste Land*. In contrast to *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men* is simpler in structure and conception. As we know that *The Waste Land* represents universal disorder, its structure is episodic and its effect depends greatly on the cumulative effect of the episodes. Audrey F. Cohill Observes "the predicament of *The Hollow Men* is that of *The Waste Landers*, they lack the 'courage to be' and they have lost their reality because they have never affirmed it." (2) He further notes that 'their malady lies not in any civil intention but in their evasion of any intention whatever.' (3) It is just based on a religious quest and failure. Actually this poem refers to those men whose value system has been shot to hell by the destruction brought on by technological developments in the early modern era. The man hope to be remembered not as 'violent soul' but as 'hollow men' i.e. men whose heads are stuffed with straw—a material that has little value and blows in the wind. The poet laments that sunlight can not illuminate the classical teachings; represented by the classical columns- nothing is left but a cultural desert, a 'cactus land.' Religion, the main unifying force in Western culture for almost two thousand years offers no hope. The end is near.

This profound creation begins with two epigraphs: one is a quotation from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* remarking on the death of the doomed character Kurtz. Kurtz comes to Congo with the mission of spreading civilization in the African country but the lust for wealth degenerates

him into an ivory trader. He loses the integrality of his personality and is reduced to a hollow sham. But the hollow men do not have the courage to condemn ourselves; hence we can have Kurtz's vision or his 'belief' or 'conviction' or 'the glimpse of truth'. The Hollow Men were like scarecrows, having nothing vital within them, their speech were dry, meaningless whispering, the images created by the poet for their voices were '*wind in a dry grass*' blown helplessly. Hollow men have merely the figures of human body without individual entities or distinct identities.

The other is an expression used by English schoolchildren who want money to buy fireworks to celebrate *Guy Fawkes Day*. On this holiday, people burn straw effigies of Fawkes, who tried to blow up the British Parliament back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

At the beginning of this poem it appears that TS Eliot always struggled with spirituality and belief. He always tried to search out a new form of religious knowledge. His study of Buddhism began just his mind was most able to accept this complicated religious practice. But Eliot's religious search did not end with Buddhism, throughout his life he would continue to study religious texts including some from Hindu and Confucian origins. Some critics have described his relationship with religion as a '*process of elimination and rejection*'. (4) Eastern philosophy provided him with a more ancient practice, one that required the constant involvement of the practitioner. By the term Hollow Men Eliot did not mean particular hollow person but he had represented the real situation of the whole Europe. The hollow men have no vision and purpose in their life. They have lacks of depth, substance and faith. They are pursuing only material things and their prayer for divine have become blasphemous and corrupted prayer. We can say that this poem is about the Survivors of World War I. They are full of guilt and can not understand why they were the ones who were picked to live. They are hollow men because they have seen a lot and can not get over what happened. Thus, the hollow men are living in the state of dilemma. They are unable to face the divine power (creator) while they want to face the mighty and get salvation. But they have not eyes to dare with God. They want to be a spiritual man but their mind was filled with straw of misdeeds. Actually their activities were not bad but they are in dilemma and in confusion that they shall be listened and accepted by God or not. Such kind of confusion was aroused with the terrible consequence of World War I. Their corrupt thinking and immoral actions make them more undesirable in the society and before God and they become 'a wise devil.' Sometimes it appears that modern hollow men are ignoring human dignity, they have become a man reduced to the status of a humanoid animal or an ape. Humanity begins with culture and civilized behavior. Everyone must develop an awareness of virtues, actions, character and disposition worthy of a cultured individual. Otherwise, one is bound to remain in a state of cultural infancy and ignominy.

We must keep in mind that hollow men were living in the age of materialism totally. They were considering themselves to be only a body, assembled with physical senses and mind. Consequently, all their desires, aspirations and actions were confined to their physical body. The roots of all confusion lie when they forgot their own real self and mistakenly identify themselves as merely a physical body. In this confusion, they treat the vehicle (body) as the driver (soul). Thus the hollow men create an environment on this earth for themselves with their own willful perception and outlook. God has created man for spreading the message of love and helpful co-existence and not for belligerence, instigating violence and torturing fellow beings. But the hollow men were in dilemma and considered their Godless lives and realized that the most likely

place for them would be purgatory, though none of the kingdoms of death truly appeal to them. Heaven to them would be riddled with guilt, as looking into the eyes of God would overwhelm them with that guilt. Hell is not an optimistic outcome for anyone; however they see it as their best choice as they are already living without God and His grace. Their lives that they have spend mulling over their options but never lacking any actions was what they believed purgatory to be. The recurring theme is the doubt in this poem. The Hollow men think over the prospect of faith and Christianity everyday, however, their doubt stands in their way. The hollow men, actually, like the idea of divine power but their reality is without Him because of the shadow of doubt coming between them and God. This is continued until the end of the poem. The empty, pointless bodies, the hollow men wander the earth desperately, groping together to avoid death. Death is not something outside of the earth.

*The Hollow Men* by TS Eliot, the most swaying personality of his literary genre, fashioned his belief about future of the men of this dead land, the Waste Land. This is the most vibrant poem of the age. Eliot has contemplated a new pattern of 'watching and waiting'. The poet, in his famous essay on "Baudelaire" has written "it is better in a paradoxical way to do evil than to do nothing at least, we exist." (5) But the situation of Hollow Men is different; they do not exist at all;

*"Shape without form, shade without color,  
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion ;"( 6)*

T. S Eliot, clairvoyant of modern age, strident personal life, yet his poetics comprises rare flavors of fragment life. Infused with symbol and images, *The Hollow Men* written in five parts focusing on *madness, guilt, remorse and breakdown of humanity*. It is a stagnant poetry for repentance which portrays mans dilemma in turn with spiritually sluggishness. In this poem Eliot encapsulates predicaments of the *post World War I* generation. It is one of the best touch stone of modern literature that vainly strives for meaning. Eliot believed in the 'impersonal' poetry and said, "Poetry is not turning loose of emotions but escape from emotion, and it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality."(7) Of course, only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from these things. This *nostalgic and Avent – garde* poem dissects man's wretched and fearful existence in the world. *The Hollow Men* has an experience describing a very different approach to death and defy an inviting having no past, no present and no future. It is a cold and melancholic in the terms of poetic content matter that, perhaps, Eliot understood life through death the epigraph of poet 'A penny for the old guy' (8) is assign of permission to take the subject of death as *if proclaiming anti Sybil wish to never face death the repeated innuendos of fear of the death is reminder of the modern man*. The connection of mortality with one's love with this can be traced with the opening line;

*"We are the hollow men  
we are the stuffed men  
Leaning together,  
Headpiece filled with straw." (9)*

It is all for a general disbelief in the course of human creation. We like to be alive but don't welcome death because we fear to be answerable for our deeds on this universe. We create ourselves against our creator and became;

*“Shape without form, shade without color,  
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion.”(10)*

Perhaps, Eliot tries to seek an identity of the people and their spiritual faith. As we all know that our spiritual identity is defined by our soul. Our deep and wide-ranging scriptures describe it in different ways. Our soul is formless, yet a life force. It is our true essence and eternal self. Eliot realized it about these men and thinks of many possible ways of their salvation but it is only as for as stars before our eyes;

*“Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quite and meaningless;  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rats’ feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar.”(11)*

It sounds a kind of fear, a kind of pain or lack of courage in them. The poet has set out to describe in a poignant term as a remedy but in vain. The three basics of divine fulfillment are not possible because there is nothing like belief on which they can collapse the very health of spirituality. The poet has searched such hollowness and emptiness in his ‘*Four Quartets*’ 1943) too with all his quest but finds it as a place of disaffection under a dim light. Such dim light is neither day light of joy nor night light which purifies the soul with deprivation.

If we take up ibid poetic line and presume that the hollow men are afraid of facing their source (creator), which our Poet Laureate did not portray, then I am at ease to say that these men are enveloped in fear which is ultimately responsible for accumulation of knowledge. They utter;

*“Let me be no nearer  
In deaths dream kingdom  
Let me also wear  
Such deliberate disguises  
Rat’s coat, crow skin,  
Crossed staves in a field ;”( 12)*

Similar was the case of the young man in ‘*The Portrait of a lady*’, another early poem of TS Eliot, where the young man decides;

*“I must borrow every changing shape  
To find expression.....dance, dance  
Like a dancing Bear growing.....  
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an Ape.” (13)*

Likewise, in his another poem, ‘*Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*’, Prufrock in his utter vacillation, thinks to become a sea-animal;

*“I should have been a pair of ragged claws*

*Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” (14)*

Eliot’s belief in human tension means death. He says in ‘*Ash Wednesday*’;

*“This is the time of tension between dying and birth.” (15)*

Actually, the considerate and warmhearted reader can reach in the deep corner of Eliot’s quest for belief by sympathizing these hollow men who do not dare to think of any action. It is neither surrender in the wish of God not rebelling against Him. It is exactly what comes in *The Waste Land*;

*“I will show you fear in a handful of dust.” (16)*

Critics unanimously agree that these men do not have courage or do not dare to face the death. If so, the reader can enjoy their lack of knowledge or belief. I think they were far off from the aim of life. While they should practice a meaningful life and aim at;

*“Nirbhay swagat karo mrityu ka,  
Mrityu ek vishram sthal hai.” (17)*

If they were stuffed men, they ought to decide as;

*“Vichar lo ki martya ho, Na mrityu se daro kabhi,  
Maro parantu yo maro ki yad Jo karein sabhi.” (18)*

The hollow men could have experienced their existence and believed that;

*“Karm yogya se jeevan ke sapano ka swarg milenga,  
Isi vipin mein manas ki asha ka kusum khilenga”. (19)*

I feel if we do not know, we would be lost. The immortal soul at the time of death leaves the human body and connects with *Supreme Soul, the God*, but;

*“This is the dead land  
This is cactus land  
Here the stone images  
Are raised.” (20)*

Interestingly, it is in the physical form of a human body that the soul can progress in its journey. The individual soul, at the time of death, reconnects comforting itself like a homecoming;

*“In a field  
Behaving as the wind behaves,  
No nearer” (21)*

However, human brain coupled with the powerful experience of physical senses, often lose the spiritual track. The direct eyes of the ‘blessed soul’ are in heaven but here, though these men



have their eyes, they reflect the impression of extreme stage of the whirlwind surrounding their inner- self . How anyone, who has not learned to participate in collaboration with Nature (God) can dare to face his eyes. The hollow men had become not only ungrateful to the creator but dishonest too. An ungrateful and dishonest fellow can not dare to face the eyes of the master to whom he owes;

*“Eyes I dare not meet in dreams  
In death’s dream kingdom  
These do not appear.” (22)*

Egoistic desires, sensual pleasures and materialistic pursuits consume every pore of us. But let me take up another impact of fear too. I feel where there is fear there is no love. Strange things pop up at us like gargoyles when we are liberated from our delusion. Madness never seems as real as when we first escape it. My own liberation came through fortunate circumstances. Generations of novelists, poets and scholars have impaled themselves on Mexico’s jagged contradiction. The experts savor their own bafflement. Segregation is a strange but significant form of dehumanization. . It is a striking approach to life that separates body from spirit, dark from light, action from thought. By solving our race- problems, we can show the way toward repairing all the chasms that split the world. but this cannot do unless we see segregation not simply as something that concerns race but as an act, a defense, perhaps a ritual, than can be used in numberless ways.

Today, in the chaos of a fast- changing world, many people are behaving like children who are upset because they cannot run away from a world that is round. Some want to escape human growth by jumping off into outer space. Some want to return backward into the past. Some turn to violence .Some try to withdraw into ideologies, abstract schemes that often become to their believers, more important than living human beings. But we cannot escape each other, cannot remain segregated. Just as the nineteenth century was the age of ideologies and segregation, the twentieth century is becoming the age of human relations. Again the mental temperature is shooting up. In spite of everything, there’s a smell of hope in the air. Admit it and you’ll be called a crazy optimist. It could be worse. All during the 1950s and most of the 1960s, people were either ‘*touch –mined*’ or ‘*fuzzy-mined*.’ Any optimism about human possibilities or hope for the gentler persuasions secured you the ‘*fuzzy – minded*’ label to be ‘*touch- mined*’ you needed only pessimism, distrust of all human motives and belief in force or threat in all our experiences, there is always the experience, the observer, who is gathering to himself more and more or denying himself. Is that not a wrong process? We can wipe it out completely and put it aside only when I experience not as thinker experiences, but when I am aware of the false process and see the state in which the thinker is the thought.

Part II and Part IV of the poem take up ‘*Eyes*’ as if they represent chances of joy over fear or possibility of hope to sail on the ocean of life. They wanted to go in ‘*death’s dream kingdom*’ from the ‘*twilight kingdom*’. The evasiveness of the hollow men has been emphasized with the symbol of the eyes. While it is not clear whose eyes they are, it is enough that they represent spiritual challenge. The eyes appear first as;

*“Eyes I dare not meet in dreams.” (23)*

The eyes are noticeably absent from the twilight world in which the hollow men exists. Their eyes were linked with the perpetual star and their appearances were suggested only as a possibility evokes hope as well as fear. The stars are fading because these men are begging like dead man. They are trembling as having no vigor. They are but like dry grass of a desert. They will pray the broken stones which were created by them. They are the people who avoid facing the face.

*“The eyes are not here,  
There are no eyes here;  
In this valley of dying stars,  
In this hollow valley,  
This broken jaw of our lost kingdom;” (24)*

He certainly has a conviction with reason. It is not based on arid concepts of narrow intellectualism but rather the application of systematic thinking based on facts revealed from time to time. It is that reason which helps us decide with objective and ends are embracing and which ought to be given up. The Hollow Men have neither knowledge nor reason. Had they knowledge they can withstand the test of reasoning.

Part V describes the comparativeness developing in the mind of the lost soul. The men think that the world is prickly pear for them and hence make many loose path of happiness. They forget that a happy life can only be achieved in an unhappy condition. Life is an art of management for those who know it. They have a compelling propensity of dwelling in the past and brooding about the unseen future, thereby neglecting present. These men have a shadow in all short of their natural thinking. Nevertheless the last section presents an unprecedented condition of them. The assailing doubts are nicely presented by nursery song. It is but natural that the man trying to solve life quiz falls preys to dilemma. They ultimately whisper something to get some relief from that puzzle;

*“Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act.  
Falls the shadow.” (25)*

The word ‘*shadow*’ is realized by these men in many ways. The idea, reality, motion and act are cryptic as far as we connect them with ‘*falls the shadow*’

Myriad desires assail them. It appears that they desired for wealth, power and fame in the past. It leads them to discontent, frustration and inner turmoil. The very beauty of life remains untapped passing in a mindless pursuit of desire. We understand that a state of no desire is verily an impossibility and tantamount to Godhood. Yet, they could certainly have worked with full understanding on minimizing their desire and gradually relinquishing them. They make many attributes;

*“Between the conception,  
And the creation,*



*Between the emotion  
And the response,  
Falls the shadow.” (26)*

Thus, at last, they are speaking as if smattering in some less known language; ‘*For thine life is very long*’ (27) for them. Likewise, Eliot tries to investigate another most crucial emotion called desires;

*“Between the desires  
And the spasm.” (28)*

These men have desire of eternal bliss which itself is undesirable in a man. Many Saints and theologians forbade this kind of desire. Lord Krishna, the world Guru has, time and again directed us against it;

*“A man is confronted in spiritual knowledge when he forsaketh every desire which entereth into his heart, and of himself is happy and content in the self- through the self.” (29)*

The spasm is in existence in these men with potentialities of spiritual knowledge but;

*“It has lost the capacity to reflect the radiance of the Self, just as a lake whose waters are filled with silt loses its capacity to reflect the sun.” (30)*

However ‘*the shadow*’ continues as the obstacle in realization. These are the values of infinite mind. They are having limbs but motionless, hence dead. They are agitated and troubled in the form of shadow because they do not have potentiality of understanding the true nature of the mind. They are neither in the waking state nor in dream or in sleep. In this way the mystery of the modern world has mysteries perceived by this difficult poet. Thus, I find this V section of *The Hollow Men* as the most mysterious part and a powerful thought provoking quest in spirituality. This movement, which begins with children’s nursery song, explores through mysterious shadow. It ends in inability to pray for God and fall in His feet for mercy. And that was the way of learned prophet’s forecast about doomsday of human being not in some other space but on this very earth.

After analyzing the situation and status of the hollow men, there are a lot of puzzling questions arising in my mind like Who will bring so many changes in human beings heart? How it will possible? What will be the medium for transformation of hell into heaven? However, believers in the omnipotence of God have no reason to doubt. When working for a divine cause, intellectuals as well as common men bestowed with tremendous supernatural power and energy’. If human beings are following the virtues and values of human beings, free from all vice, believing in God, all will become easy because God is so gracious heart. In my opinion, it will be desirable to know some instances from the great epic *Ramayana* in Hindu Mythology, an old vulture like *Jatayu* had suddenly gathered enough courage to confront *Ravana*, who was the greatest warrior of his time. Similarly, a squirrel was inspired in its faith, to contribute its little might in bridging

the ocean for *Lord Rama*. The poorest of the poor *Shabri* was so much moved by the arrival of Lord Rama to her hut that she thought it fit to offer her petty collection of berries to Him. Did poor *Sudama* hesitate while offering his handful of rice to Lord Krishna as a gift? When divinity needs human contribution, its invisible field of inspiration pervading entire universe make kings like *Harishchandra* who sell their kingdoms, their children, wives and even their oneself. When inspired by God, one can not restraint from contributing one's best to the ideals.

### Conclusion:

To conclude we can analyze the reality of this poem. This work is neatly recorded drama of human affair which end whimpering in this 'cactus land'. The hollow men present the lack of 'Courage to be'. Nevertheless, the courage to take any drastic action does not exist in them because of lack of belief in any positive value. The nature of believing and the nature of conceptual thought needed exploration looking within and searching for the waves of living. When Eliot was composing this poem, he was living in that phase in which he did not project situation of the vulgarities of the debased life. He withdrew himself from satire and criticism to constructive and credible search for truth. He explores into the inner world of the spirit duly abandoning meaningless outer world of darkness. Modern men or hollow men have been forgetting Buddhist ideas, suffering, attachment, detachment and the cultivation of compassion. But the hollow men had exhibited their meanness in creating utter chaos and disorder, the founder of this beautiful world will not permit to anyone to make it desolate by his misdeeds and evil schemes. No doubt, the devilish acts of any person create terror. Nevertheless, the force of divinity entrusted with protection of the universe as well as human beings. At last but not least, The hollow men should follow the three *Da* of *The Waste Land*. The word *Da* is sankrit word. First *Da* means *Datta*, which stands 'to give,' second *Da* stands for *Dayadhvam* which means 'to sympathize' and this *Da* stands for *Damyata* whose meaning is 'to control', And *Shantih*, *Shantih*, and *Shantih*.

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