

T. S. Eliot
"The Hollow Men"

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri of New England descent, on Sept. 26, 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 other major literary awards.

Eliot saw an exhausted poetic mode being employed, that contained no verbal excitement or original craftsmanship, by the Georgian poets who were active when he settled in London. 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).

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 who was a European trader who had gone in the "the heart of darkness" by traveling into the central African jungle, with European standards of life and conduct. Because he has 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 paralyzed 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.

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.

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.

Part three defines the representation of death's kingdom in relationship to the worship of the hollow men. A dead, arid land, like its 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.

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.

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."

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 G-d 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.

