

ANALYSIS

“The Hollow Men” (1925)

T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

“It would be glib to say that in ‘The Waste Land’ and ‘The Hollow Men’ Eliot wrote his *Inferno* and that since then his poems represent various stages of passing through a *Purgatorio*; still such a remark may possibly illuminate both his aims and achievement.... From that early poem onward, through the much deeper accents of ‘Gerontion’ and ‘The Waste Land,’ the prevailing theme of Eliot’s poems is the emptiness of life without belief, an emptiness that finally resounds with sickening fear and desperation in ‘The Hollow Men’.... Through ‘The Waste Land’ and ‘The Hollow Men’ resounded the poet’s dread of death and dissolution, a shudder at the thought of bones ‘rattled by the rat’s foot only, year to year’.... ‘Mistah Kurtz—he dead’—the harrowing climax of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, his expression of utter horror, epitomizes in a sentence the very tone of blasphemous hopelessness which issues from ‘The Hollow Men’....”

F. O. Matthiessen

The Achievement of T. S. Eliot

(1935; Oxford/Galaxy 1959) 11, 99, 118, 53

“From a letter Pound wrote to Eliot early in 1922, we know that Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* was very much in his mind at the time he wrote ‘The Waste Land.’... The only direct influence of the Conrad story is in the first of the songs of the Thames-daughters in Part III.... Psychologically, the experience in ‘The Hollow Men’ is even more despairing than that of the conclusion of ‘The Waste Land.’

The full horror of the situation of spiritual stagnation is experienced, without the actively dramatized revulsion from the contemporary scene, or the actively dramatized inner struggle between compulsion and revulsion towards personal change. The poet sees himself inescapably identified with his environment, and any power of choice or movement towards action of any sort seems utterly paralyzed. It is a condition which Jung, as well as Eliot, characterizes symbolically as the meeting with the Shadow. To Jung it is the confronting of our own inner ‘darkness,’ which means ‘bitter shock, though it is the indispensable prerequisite of every renewal of the spirit.’...

He can no longer project his own ‘darkness’ upon all the elements in his environment to which he feels alien, but superior. He can no longer find any release in the exposure of the hollowness and horror of a Sweeney, of a decadent ‘landlord,’ of a Madame Sosostriis, of empty, aimless women and young men carbuncular. He himself is a dweller in darkness as deep as that of those he had so surely and cynically displayed, and far deeper than that of those ‘lost violent souls’ in history or imaginative creation, who, if damned, were at least damned for overt action, and not for...passive non-entity....

The symbol of the eyes in ‘The Hollow Men,’ which are the only hope of overcoming the Shadow, cannot belong to any vision of romantic illusion, any more than they can be Kurtz’s ‘wide and immense stare’ [from *Heart of Darkness*; compare eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleberg in *The Great Gatsby*]. In Part I they are the ‘direct eyes’ of those of assured faith, who have died, but later the symbol absorbs much richer implications.... Parts III and IV develop the horror of ‘death’s dream kingdom.’... The water symbol here has no regenerative value. It is the ‘tumid river’ as described in *Heart of Darkness*... After this torturing picture of hollowness, loneliness, darkness and deadness, we are reminded again of Dante and Beatrice; of how, after his repentance, she bathed him in the river of Lethe, and her stern gaze turned to smiling encouragement, to ‘eyes of light.’...

There is certainly no hope in the conclusion. Instead of any vision, any release, any forward movement, any light or any ‘wind’s singing,’ there is the eternal going round in the cactus land, enclosed in time and place, in a childish nursery-rhyme world of make-believe. Then, passing out of the concrete evocation of

physical parallels, the poet conceives of the Shadow as ‘paralyzed force,’ as that abstract principle of the negation of the will, which either uses the forms of prayer without the substance of action, or evades the issue by a postponement... He is lost in the Shadow, and his ‘world ends’ not in any self-chosen dark night of the soul, but in a sense of tormented, whimpering vacuity.”

Elizabeth Drew
T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry
(Scribner’s 1949) 91-97

“This poem (1925) is provided with two epigraphs, one pointing to a basic contrast and the other to a basic resemblance. The hollow men are antithetic to ‘Mistah Kurtz’ but like the ‘Old Guy,’ that is, the effigy of Guy Fawkes. The hero of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* enjoys an advantage over the hollow men, not least in the fact that he is dead and they only deadened. Kurtz and Guy Fawkes both were ‘lost violent souls,’ not hollow men. But the effigy of Guy Fawkes is a hollow man, for this epigraph derives from the game of make-believe in which children use a stuffed effigy of Guy Fawkes as a means to beg pennies for fireworks on the fifth of November. The relation of this epigraph to the poem, however, suggests another inference: As children make a game of make-believe out of Guy Fawkes so we make a similar game out of religion. The game ritual of the poem supports this implication.

I

The first lines bring the title and epigraph into critical relationship. We are like the Old Guy, effigies stuffed with straw. It may be observed that the first and last parts of this poem indicate a church service, and the ritual of effigies is suggested throughout. The action of this part is indicative of the service: ‘Leaning together...whisper together,’ the voices ‘quiet and meaningless’ as the service drones on. Then the paradoxes, in which one term denies the other, turn these effigies into abstractions, devoid of even their arid appearance, self-contradictory even in this realm. The erstwhile worshippers disappear in a blur of shapes, shade, gesture, to which no reality is attached.

Then the crucial orientation is developed, toward ‘death’s other Kingdom.’ Those who have crossed unafraid remember us—except for the ironic qualification—in terms of the basic opposition between Kurtz and the Old Guy, ‘not as lost violent souls,’ but only as the effigies of this service. Now we know where we are in a larger sense, at least that we are in a kingdom of death. And let us observe that the confusing kingdoms of death in the poem are distinguished rather simply: First, the kingdoms of death without relation to God or church have no capital; second, death’s real kingdom finds its similitude in life as the ‘dream’ or ‘twilight’ kingdom.

II

Part II defines the hollow men in relation to the reality which those ‘with direct eyes’ have met, and develops the contrast implied by ‘direct.’ Fortunately, the eyes he dare not meet even in dreams do not appear to ‘death’s dream kingdom.’ There they are only reflected, indirect and broken light; wind is reflected by a swinging tree; voices are another illusion of the wind; all is perceived indirectly, and not without beauty. The images are reminiscent of Biblical imagery, but this kingdom resembles Dante’s limbo of Trimmers.

He too would be no nearer, but would also wear intentional disguises—those proper to the scarecrow, behaving, like the tree, as the wind behaves. He would be no nearer, no more direct, in this twilight kingdom. He fears the ultimate vision. The eyes in this poem evoke a range of feeling dominated by that which the eyes of Charon excite in Dante (*Inferno*, C.3).

III

Part III defines this similitude of death’s kingdom in relation to the worship of the hollow men. A dead, arid land, like its people, it raises stone images of the spiritual, which are supplicated 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. 'Waking alone'—not quite out of the dream kingdom—at a propitious time, lips that would adore pray instead to a broken image, for the impulse is frozen. The 'broken stone' unites the 'stone images' and the 'broken column,' which bent the sunlight.

IV

Part IV explores this impulse in relation to the land, which now darkens perceptibly as the valley of the shadow of death. Now there are not even similitudes of eyes, and the 'fading' becomes the 'dying' star. The land as a 'hollow valley' carries a ghostly reflection of the human physiognomy in decay, ending as the broke, inarticulate, image of the lost kingdoms of the Old Testament exiles. And with this declination comes the awareness that the indirect meeting found in aspects of beauty must yield to the direct meeting which has been shunned, for this is the last of meeting places.

In action the hollow men now 'grope together / And avoid speech,' gathered on the banks of the swollen river which must be crossed to 'death's other kingdom.' The contrast with Part I is clear, and the river suggests that of Dante's *Inferno* (C.3). Without any eyes at all they are without any vision unless 'the eyes' return as the 'perpetual,' not fading or dying, star; as the 'multifoliate rose' of this kingdom. But for empty men this is only a hope. As star becomes rose, so the rose becomes the rose window of the church; the rose as an image of the church, and multifoliate, appears in Dante's *Paradiso* (C.31-32).

V

But Part V develops the reality, not the hope, of empty men; the cactus, not the rose. And it begins with the prickly pear ritual of cactus land; the nursery level of make-believe mocks the hope of empty men. In desire they 'circumambulate' the pear, but are frustrated by the pickles. Here we may recall 'the hour when we are Trembling with tenderness,' for the poem now develops that frustration of impulse. At various levels, in various aspects of life, between the impulse and its realization 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 the Shadow into a shape of horror, almost a personification of its negative character. The antiphonal division of this part, marked by the type, exhibits the irony which leads 'round the mulberry bush' to the last line.

Various stages are interrupted by the interpolation of elements that qualify this thwarting Shadow; after the first, the passage from the Lord's Prayer relates the Shadow to religion, with irony in the attribution; after the second, the response about the length of life relates it to the burden of life; and after the third, the Lord's Prayer again relates it to the Kingdom that is so hard. The repetition follows the thwarting of the series that produces life itself, frustrating the essence from descent to being (see *Purgatorio*, 31: 107). This is the essential irony of their thwarted lives.

Then the rather ambiguous relation of these interrupting elements to the Shadow is made more explicit. This is done by turning these responses...into the main chant, with the result that each completion hesitates between its former complement and the Shadow, and at the same time suggests by its truncation the final interruption. This end comes by way of ironic completion as the nursery rhyme again takes up its repetitive round ('This is the way we go to church'), and terminates with the line that characterizes the equivocating excuses. They are the whimpers of fear with which the hollow men end, neither the bang of Guy Fawkes Day nor of the 'lost violent soul.' The conclusion also transforms the liturgical 'world without end.'

In Part V 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 God 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 into liturgical form.

The 'Shadow' derives from Dowson's most famous poem... Of course it has been transformed, but it is still qualified by the memory. The part to which it most obviously connects earlier in the poem appears in the 'lips that would kiss'; the desire that is frustrated there preserves this ambiguity in Part V. Other repetitions in Dowson's poem besides the shadow of Cynara have probably had some effect on Eliot's

poem. In Dowson, after each lapse in faith, which is followed by the line 'And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,' there is a statement of its effect, followed by his declaration of faith. After each lapse, the shadow precipitates these consequences, and this circumstance may have suggested Eliot's transformation. Some of Dowson's other lines may lurk behind some of Eliot's...

Comparison suggests that Eliot's theme of the frustration of desire by fear still carries oppositions and overtones of the poem from which its 'shadow' is derived. And this frustration is finally the reason why the eyes are obscured and the land a realm of shadows. Here Eliot, to use his words on Baudelaire, is 'looking into the Shadow.' Thus Dowson's poem provided the hint by which Part V amalgamated all the others, translating the lack of substance which they described into the thwarting shadow. One reason for considering the possible genesis of Part V is the light it throws on Eliot's piecemeal mode of composition."

George Williamson
A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem-by-Poem Analysis
(1949; Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1957) 155-62

"'The Hollow Men' is similar in tone and content but much less extensive in treatment [compared to 'The Waste Land']. The epigraph is from Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, which depicts the contrast between the artificiality of civilization and the elemental but savage power of primitive superstition. The Hollow Men are the citizens of modern Western culture, synthetically stuffed with opinions, ideas, and faiths they cannot feel. The senselessness of the modern man's daily routine is indicated in the childish nursery rhyme which begins Section V. The fourth stanza of this section ('Between the desire...') suggests the impotence of the Prufrock-Gerontion type of figure who is reduced to inaction through the 'Shadow' of thought. The chief feature of modern culture is its banality and pettiness; the world ends 'not with a bang but a whimper'."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 490

"Occupying a position between 'The Waste Land' and 'Ash-Wednesday,' both with respect to content and the order in which the poems were written, 'The Hollow Men' begins with references to human paralysis and ends with a juxtaposition of the human world of illusory dreams and the divine Kingdom beyond death. The first four sections of the poem deal respectively with the general sterility of the 'living dead,' the particular fear of reality and of the eyes of judgment, the desolation of the world between birth and death, and the faint hope for the appearance of the 'perpetual star' and 'multifoliate rose'; the fifth section recapitulates the themes of the first four in alternation of fragmentary phrases. The ending is ambiguous, both a cry of despair at the emptiness of human life and a simultaneous assertion 'For Thine is the Kingdom'."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Eliot said in an interview that 'The Hollow Men' originated 'out of separate poems... That's one way in which my mind does seem to have evolved through the years poetically—doing things separately and then seeing the possibility of focusing them together, altering them, making a kind of whole of them.' The first four sections had all appeared separately before the publication of the whole, in 1925. Some of the material was originally in 'The Waste Land.' The Hollow Men are like the city crowds of 'The Waste Land,' the damned who are so because of a lack of spiritual reality, even their sins lacking violence and conviction. The first references are, then, Dantean. There is a contrast with the blessed; their 'direct eyes' are avoided in II, where the hollowness of the Hollow Men begets scarecrow imagery. The landscape is a stony desert of privation; despair and a consciousness of the necessary imperfection of a life which resembles that of the faint-hearted damned are the other themes developed. For the title see *Julius Caesar* IV.ii.23, where the word means 'insincere'; Conrad uses 'hollow' several times in *Heart of Darkness*."

Frank Kermode & John Hollander, eds.
Modern British Literature

(Oxford 1973) 490

Michael Hollister (2015)