



# Men's Spiritual Vacuity and Inefficacy in Eliot's Poem *The Hollow Men*

## OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:  
ENG-2021-10014252

Volume: 10

Issue: 1

Month: December

Year: 2021

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 09.09.2021

Accepted: 15.11.2021

Published: 01.12.2021

Citation:  
Sharma, Lok Raj. "Men's Spiritual Vacuity and Inefficacy in Eliot's Poem *The Hollow Men*." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–5.

DOI:  
<https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v10i1.4252>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

**Lok Raj Sharma**

Associate Professor of English, Makawanpur Multiple Campus, Hetauda, Nepal

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5127-2810>

## Abstract

*The Hollow Men* by Eliot is a widely read poem which is structured of five sections. These sections deal with a group of hollow men unable to communicate with one another, a hollow man who is afraid to look at others directly, the barren land where they cannot fulfill their desire, their unwillingness to look at others and to be looked at by them, and finally a nursery rhyme which they can't recite completely respectively. They are unable to think, create, respond and act because of the shadow that falls in between them. This article primarily explores men's spiritual vacuity and inefficacy in this poem. It is an episodic free verse poem which reflects the poet's pessimistic vision towards the human life and the present world. The poet presents the men as effigies which lack human efficiency and the world as a dead cactus land lacking the spring of blooms and joys. It reflects the conditions and contexts of modern men through divergent allusions. Men feel helpless and lonely despite being in a group, find no senses and meanings in spite of their assertions, realize their inefficiency and inability despite their sound health and certificates, feel unfortunate and miserable in spite of their material advancement and wealth, and find death in their lives despite being alive.

**Keywords:** Inefficacy, Poetry, Spiritual, The Hollow Men, T.S. Eliot, Vacuity

## Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot (September 26, 1888-January 4, 1965) is one of the most prominent English poets. In 1948, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his outstanding contributions to contemporary poetry. His two famous poems *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* were written in the third phase (1918-1925). Both poems deal with spiritual crisis in modern men. Eliot transformed himself to Anglicanism in 1927. He describes himself as a "Classicist in literature, Royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion" in the preface to his collection of articles for Lancelot Andrewes (1928). For the rest of his life, Eliot clung to this belief. Nonetheless, he wrestled with the difficulties of arriving at any form of religious system throughout his writings.

Sarin mentions that "T. S. Eliot conflicted with religion and belief during his life".

*The Hollow Men* got published in 1925. Concerning the title of the poem, Eliot proclaimed that he formed this title by being inspired from *The Hollow Land* (1856) by William Morris and *The Broken Men* (1903) by Rudyard Kipling; however some critics believe that the title was inspired by Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* which was published in 1599. This poem is perhaps the most negative and pessimistic of all Eliot's poems. It does not only reflect the paralyzed psyche of Post- World War I, but it also reveals Eliot's mental agony, the painful experience of collapsing marriage with Vivien Eliot, his skepticism towards religious hope and love. This poem begins with two epigraphs:

*Mistah Kurtz-he dead*  
*A penny for the Old Guy*

The first one is a quotation from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) in which the servant Marlow reports the death of Mistah Kurtz. The other is a pithy expression spoken by English school children who need money to buy fireworks to rejoice Guy Fawkes Day. On this holiday, people burn straw effigies of Fawkes, who tried to blow up the British Parliament in 1605. Jaleel pinpoints that "Eliot used two different lines from different cultures as epigraphs" for *The Hollow Men* project the human conditions in the modern era. Such allusions have deepened the essence of this poem. Mallik clarifies the term an allusion as "a passing reference to someone, something, or some incident". The hollow men represent the modern men.

## Literature Review

### Poetry and its Language

Poetry is a complex genre of literature. Culler defines poetry as "a language that makes abundant use of figures of speech and language that aims to be powerfully persuasive". Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy articulate that "poetry is the most compressed form of language". It is difficult for average readers to understand it. Pugh and Johnson point out the challenges for the readers for the proper analysis of the poem, and expose that "poems often challenges readers as well asking them to interpret words, phrases, images, and symbols conjoined in striking ways". Poetry is strikingly different from other genres of literature. It is more musical and more emotional.

### The Hollow Men

*The Hollow Men* written after the World War I aptly reflects the soulless generations who seem to have lost hope in religion and love. Batra takes it as "a poem that expresses the spiritual deadness, horror and despair". Furthermore, Hasan writes that "in the poem, the spiritual decay and spiritual paralysis are the main causes of human suffering", and Kaplan points out that this poem "bears a strong thematic resemblance to the waste land theme". Batra describes this poem as "a poem that expresses the horror, despair and spiritual numbness". Barzinji, on the other hand, affirms that this poem is mainly "Eliot's exploration of the state of his own soul as

one of many modern souls suffering from the same torment of hollowness, and the hollowness comes from the loss of faith and belief in humanity". Manschreck points out "the inability of the Hollow Men for praying due to lack of their faith in spirituality". Hasan expresses his similar view regarding the end of world that ends with a whimper, but not with a bang".

Mandal and Modak mention that the structure of the poem and assert that "Eliot uses a structural repetition" in the poem for reinforcing the existence and the mental echelon of the hollow men. The syntactic patterns of the poem are irregular, and this irregularity implies the absurdity and uncertainty in life. Lennard assumes that "poetic syntax has additional license and must be more complex still". *The Hollow Men* retains ample use of figures of speech to show the inefficiency and spiritual vacuity in men. Wren and Martin affirm that "figure of speech is a departure from the ordinary form of expression or the ordinary course of ideas in order to produce a greater effect". Harmon supporting Wren and Martin adds that "a figurative image is one that involves a turn on the literal meaning of the words". The assertion "we are the hollow men" is a big metaphor in this poem. Batool, concerning the language exploited in the poem, asserts that "all language choices used by the poet lead towards the shallowness, despair, vagueness, nothingness and inability of love for the universe/ people". *Day views The Hollow Men as* "the poetry of thought", while Singh explores "the modern dilemma, the destructive and chaotic situation of the world" in this poem. Sangi, Soomro and Gopang consider this poem to reflect Eliot's views on "tradition and impersonality", and Urquhart enunciates that the men's passivity is revealed through figurative expressions in this poem. He points out that the "speaker of this poem cannot find an acceptable meaning and truth in his life". This poem is a quest of trustful meanings in the life.

### Inefficacy

Davis defines inefficacy as "experiencing diminished personal accomplishment, a perceived decline in competence or productivity, and expending energy at work without seeing any results". Shetakes inefficacy as the inability to attain

a desired outcome due to a lack of power. Similarly, Soanes and Stevenson view inefficacy as a state of “not producing the desired effect”. In the view of Brown, inefficacy is “inability to produce the desired effect”. The hollow men can do nothing, but they just wait for death. Kaplan writes that “the hollow men wait for death to liberate them from this hell into a kind of purgatory, but there is no hope of salvation even in the purgatory”.

### Spiritual Vacuity

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines spiritual as relating to the spirit, sacred matters and religious values. Vacuity is a noun that refers to an emptiness and idleness. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines vacuity as an empty space, the state of being vacuous and an inane idea. Similarly, Soanes and Stevenson define spiritual as “relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things”. Spiritual vacuity is then the state of men with the hearts lacking divine and sacred matters. It reflects the real condition of men with spiritual emptiness despite their education, position and material prosperity. Brown takes spiritual as “concerned with sacred or religious things, holy, divine, prayerful” and vacuity as “an empty or vacant space within something”. The poet uses a metaphoric expression to indicate that the modern men are hollow men “we are the hollow men”. Cuddon defines metaphor as “a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another. A comparison is usually implicit, whereas in simile it is explicit”.

### Men’s Spiritual Vacuity and Inefficacy in the Poem

One of the hollow men in the group describes themselves as the hollow men with the heads without any spirituality or human contents; rather they are like the effigies or scarecrows filled with straw. Moreover, they are not satisfied with their life. His metaphorical assertion suggests the spiritual vacuity:

We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas! (1-4)

The hollow men’s talks are meaningless and obscure. Tilak asserts that the hollow men “suffer from utter mental vacuity; their heads are filled merely with straw, rather than with anything meaningful or worthwhile”. The point of this poem is that hollow men cannot communicate with each other and cannot interact with transcendent spirituality. Singh enunciates that “a sense of self-alienation and breakdown of communication extend in the society that causes in the hollow men’s loss of identity and purpose”. It indicates their inefficacy of communication in the life as one of the hollow men asserts:

We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless. (6-7)

They are like the shapes without any fixed form. They are like the shades without colour. Their force is paralyzed unable to perform anything. They are like gestures without motion. It is their inefficiency of holding a fixed doctrine and a clear destination in life as a hollow man mentions:

Shape without form, shade without colour,  
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion; (11-12)

The central image of this poem is the kingdom and the eyes of death. The first mention to the eyes is to highlight the hollow person’s lack of direction. This is the reference to Heaven. They are afraid of heavenly eyes, because their eyes are full of mundane substances. It indicates the spiritual vacuity in their eyes:

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams  
In death’s dream kingdom  
These do not appear: (19-21)

The eyes of the hollow men will not be able to look at the eyes of those holy men after their death. It implicitly indicates that the hollow men will not be happy and satisfied even after their death. Their mundane life is vacant and worthless, so will be their life after death.

There, the eyes are (22)

The speaker asks the soul of heaven to stay away from the hollowmen. They don’t want to be close to heaven, nor do they want to be around people whose eyes can tell them something about themselves that they don’t want to know:

Let me be no nearer  
In death’s dream kingdom

Let me also wear (29-31)

The children of the hollow men are like the small effigies lacking real pleasure in their life. They are the children of the cactus land. They have seen the cacti with piercing thorns. They can sing what they see and know. They use epistrophic expressions:

Here we go round the prickly pear

Prickly pear prickly pear

Here we go round the prickly pear

At five o'clock in the morning. (68-71)

A broken jaw can be said to be related to a man's inability to speak, but it has a metaphorical meaning. It is the most disparaging place where no one dares to speak the truth. Herbert mentions that the broken jaw is "the image of desolation and lack of ability to communicate". The speaker remarks:

This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

In this last of meeting places. (56-57)

'Shadow' stands as a prominent symbol in this poem. Cuddon considers a symbol as "an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or stands for something else". The shadow may refer to darkness, fear or villainous situation that falls among them and disrupts all levels of creation. This shadow makes the hollow men paralyze physically and mentally and leaves them in the state of life in death. The shadow falls between the motion and actin makes them inefficient as the speaker points out:

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the Shadow (74-76)

Subhan affirms that "the outcome of the world without God has been pictured as a world filled with empty men". The hollow men try to chant Lord's Prayer again but this time they halt in the middle of a sentence and can't complete the chant. It indicates their inability to perform the task. It implies the men's spiritual vacuity and inefficacy. The lines read:

For Thine is the Kingdom

For Thine is

Life is

For Thine is the (91-94)

All these verse lines extracted from the poem The Hollow Men reflect a bitter reality of modern men. There is a great irony in their life. The irony can be seen through their deeds, manners and words.

## Conclusion

Eliot, who is one of the most influential poets in English literature, depicts his pessimistic vision towards the vanity of human life, the modern world and the futile efforts of men. His poem The Hollow Men primarily reflects the inefficacy of men in sharing their feelings with each other, and their spiritual vacuity that leads them to hopelessness and desolation in spite of their financial and corporeal soundness. People are unable to discern the real value or significance in their lives. The poet has exposed this bitter reality by using allusive references, symbols, repetition and figurative language to justify men's spiritual vacuity and inefficacy. This poem vividly reflects the poet's genuine message that the spiritual sterility causes the inefficacy in men despite their power, position, health, education, wealth and material prosperity. All these mundane achievements can't give men real contentment and bliss without spiritual consecration.

## References

- Barzinji, Mariwan Nasradeen Hasan. "Modernism, Modernity and Modernisation." *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 12, 2013, pp. 43-53.
- Batool, Muazzma. "Foregrounding the Theme of Shallowness in The Hollow Men: A Stylistic Analysis." *British Journal of English Linguistics*, vol. 5, no. 6, 2017, pp. 1-15.
- Batra, Shakti. *T.S Eliot: A Critical Study of His Poetry*. IVY Publishing House, 2001.
- Brown, Lesley. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Cuddon, John Anthony. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Penguin Book, 1999.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Davis, Paula. "How Burnout Impacts Men & Women Differently." *Psychology Today*, 2014. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/za/blog/pressure-proof/201404/how-burnout-impacts-men-women-differently>
- Day, Thomas. "Between the Conception / And the Creation: T.S.Eliot's The Hollow Men." *English*, vol. 57, 2008, pp. 235-144.

- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. "For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order (1928, 1929)." *T.S. Eliot The Contemporary Reviews*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 147-166.
- Ferguson, Margaret, et al. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. W.W. Norton, 2005.
- Harmon, William. *A Handbook to Literature*. Pearson, 2009.
- Hasan, Mariwan. "A Thematic Investigation into T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*: With Reference to Textual Approach." *Critical Literary Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2019, pp. 159-184.
- Herbert, Michael. *T.S. Eliot: Selected Poems*. Pearson Education Limited, 2001.
- Jaleel, Abd. "Intertextuality and Multiculturalism Appealed to Plagiarism in Selected Works of T.S. Eliot." *English Studies International Research Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2016, pp. 129-131.
- Kaplan, Robert. *T.S. Eliot's Major Poems and Plays*. Kalyani Publishers, 1995.
- Lennard, John. *The Poetry Handbook*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Mallik, Nilanko. *Compact English Prosody and Figures of Speech*. Macmilian, 2010.
- Mandal, Annesha, and Arindam Modak. "The Hollow Men - A Postmodern Reading." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 3, no.4, 2015, pp. 522-527.
- Manschreck, Clyde L. "Nihilism in the Twentieth Century: A View from here." *Church History*, vol. 45, no. 1, 1976, pp. 85-96.
- Pugh, Tison, and Margaret Johnson. *Literary Studies: A Practical Guide*. Routledge, 2014.
- Sangi, Muhammad Khan, et al. "T. S. Eliot's Indigenous Critical Concepts and *The Hollow Men*." *Language in India*, vol. 12, 2012.
- Sarin, Lindsay. *Full Circle: T. S. Eliot's Quest for Spiritual Fulfillment*. Eastern Michigan University, 2008.
- Singh, Renu. "A Study of Dilemma in *The Hollow Men* of T.S. Eliot." *Galaxy International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2013, pp. 1-11.
- Soanes, Catherine, and Angus Stevenson. *Oxford Dictionary of English*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Subhan, Ayatulla. *Challenging the Faith: T.S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' and the Abolition of Religion*. Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, 2014.
- Tilak, Raghukul. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Rama Brothers, 2011.
- Urquhart, Troy. "Eliot's *The Hollow Men*." *The Explicator*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2001, pp. 199-201.
- Wren, Percival Christopher, and Henry Martin. *High School English Grammar and Composition*. S. Chand & Company, 1981.

### Author Details

**Lok Raj Sharma**, Associate Professor of English, Makawanpur Multiple Campus, Hetauda, Nepal,  
Email ID: lokraj043@gmail.com.