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T. S. Eliot's Indigenous Critical Concepts and "The Hollow Men"

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Abstract

In this poem "The Hollow Men", the human beings have been shown devoid of the qualities of faith, moral strength, of personality, determination and that of humanity; they are like empty bodies, lacking all human virtues. By direct and indirect similes and metaphors, the poet has tried to depict a situation which not only the characters in the poem are facing but the readers also face the same feelings while reading the poem. The abstract world of the mind and the concrete and visible shape of the poem are so identical that they truly and objectively represent each other. This kind of masterly skill helps a reader understand the poem in itself – considering, in Eliot's words, the poem a thing in itself – without, again and again, looking into the mind of the poem. The title, the theme and the characters look reinforcing one another to develop the impersonal impression of the poem. However, a number of critics have called "the Hollow Men" a 'personal poem.' For it presents the poet's views on the contemporary life. It is a cry of despair unrelieved by hope. . His practice of walking on the footsteps of his forerunners is not limited only to the well-reputed artists, but the writers not so much known are also alluded at a number of places. This paper qualitatively evaluates the poet's expertise of portraying the concepts of impersonality and tradition in this poem.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 4 April 2012

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Key words: impersonality; tradition; images; allusions; objectification.

Introduction

Impersonality of poetry and tradition are two of the major critical concepts developed by T S Eliot in his works. A great number of his famous poems carry these concepts in practical manner. The poem *The Hollow Men*, although develops personal tone, at many places exhibits objectification of the poet's ideas of impersonality and tradition. *The Hollow Men* was originally composed as several different poems, which the poet gradually came to think of as sequenced. Part I 'We are the hollow men', was originally published in the winter of 1924. Part III, 'This is the dead land', was published as the third part of 'Doris' dream song' in November 1924. Parts I, II and IV were published together for the first time in March 1925. The whole poem, with part V, the final addition, appeared in 'Poems 1909-1925' later that same year. "The separate composition of each individual part, then marrying them to form one, could be the explanation for the poem's lack of identifiable narrative sequence" (Scofield, 137).

Impersonality and "The Hollow Men"

The poem starts with an epigraph that reads "A Penny for the Old Guy" referring to the November 5th celebration of Guy Fawkes Day. The day commemorates the foiling of a mass assassination plot against the king and his ministers. A group of extremist Catholics planned to usurp the king by blowing up the Houses of Parliament on November 5, 1605, the State Opening of Parliament. But one of the terrorists inadvertently exposed the plot by warning his brother-in-law, a member of Parliament, to avoid the State Opening. On the night of November 4th, Guy Fawkes was apprehended in the cellar below the House of Lords standing guard over nearly two tons of gunpowder. After being tortured for days, he was subsequently executed. The epitaph character works to depict the poet's thought in an objective manner for it stands for something meaningful. "It sets up a natural contrast to the hollowness of Modern man , who fundamentally believes in nothing and is, therefore, empty at the core of his being, like a Guy Fawkes dummy."(BrothersJudd. 1998)

The Role of Epigraph

The second epigraph, "Mistah Kurtz - He dead," refers to the enigmatic character of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This is the story of the English seaman Marlow, who was sent into deepest Africa to find the once admired, now feared renegade ivory trader Kurtz. As Marlow travels down the Congo he begins to recognize similarities between Kurtz and himself. When he finally encounters Kurtz at his trading station, he finds a "hollow sham" of a man (Conrad 109). Sick with malaria and verging on insanity, Kurtz

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 4 April 2012

Muhammad Khan Sangi, Ph.D., Abdul Fattah Soomro and Abdul Sattar Gopang, M. Phil.
Scholar:T. S. Eliot's Indigenous Critical Concepts and "The Hollow Men"

makes Marlow the keeper of his memory. Kurtz, using idealism to rationalize murder and other such heinous crimes, is the prototypical "hollow" man. (Willard.2000)

“The Hollow Men” holds the same theme as that of “The Waste Land”. It contains the poet’s reflection on the ‘subject of human nature in this world, and the relationship of this world to another, the world of death and eternity.’ In this poem the human beings have been shown devoid of the qualities of faith, moral strength, of personality, determination and that of humanity; they are like empty bodies, lacking all human virtues. Elizabeth Drew, in this connection, remarks that from psychological point of view, the feelings and experience in “The Hollow Men” is even more despairing than the same in “The Waste Land”. This poem offers no redemption whatsoever, presenting the unmitigated horrors of modern life. Doct. J. (2002), in his views on the poem, points out the impersonal quality of the poem. He says: "The imagery depicted in T.S. Eliot's poem “The Hollow Men” evokes a sense of desolate hopelessness and lends to Eliot's generally cynical view of civilization during this period in history." No ray of hope, unlike “The Waste Land” or “The Ash Wednesday”, has been shown in “the Hollow Men”. Since, the spiritual decay of the contemporary age is the theme of the poem, adequate images and symbols have been employed to represent the situation properly. Doct. J. is of the view that the poet has successfully applied here the technique of first person narration which includes all the readers along the development of the poem. “This establishes Eliot's and the readers relationship to the images and ideas presented” (Doct.J.). By doing this the poet has in fact made the readers feel the hollowness in the individuals and the society which is the theme of the poem. By direct and indirect similes and metaphors, the poet has tried to depict a situation which not only the characters in the poem are facing but the readers also face the same feelings while reading the poem. Nicol (2005), talking about the theme of the poem, says that the focus of the poem is on the inability of the desolated people’s interaction with one another, and then he writes, “The form and range of techniques employed by the poet foreground this predicament and highlight its broad applicability.” He explains that the kind of rhyme and rhythm used in the poem are nothing but to show the discontinuity and detachment of human communication. “Partial rhymes like “alas... less... grass... glass” with rasping, coarse sounds give the reader a sensation of the plight of the hollow men” (Nicol, 2005).

The Personal View

However, a number of critics have called “the Hollow Men” a ‘personal poem.’ For it presents the poet’s views on the contemporary life. It is a cry of despair unrelieved by hope. The peculiarity of the poem is that it is an inner drama with the utmost economy of words. The images echo the deadness of sensibility and the emptiness of hollow men who, like the effigies, are fit only for burning. The images and symbols constitute the strong point of the poem. The poem is a kind of elegy on some of the characters mentioned in Eliot’s early poems like “Prufrock”, “Gerontion” and “Sweeney” who are

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 4 April 2012

Muhammad Khan Sangi, Ph.D., Abdul Fattah Soomro and Abdul Sattar Gopang, M. Phil.
Scholar:T. S. Eliot’s Indigenous Critical Concepts and “The Hollow Men”

representative of modern civilization but lack in moral values and all that which makes life worthwhile. This tragic chant sums up the views of Eliot on the barrenness and decadence of modern society. The writer of Brother Judd notes says that he is so much impressed by the powerful images of the poem. About the auditory image of the rat sounds, he writes, “The comparison of the sound of modern voices to "rat's feet over broken glass" aptly dismisses all of the psycho babble and faux spirituality of the age, all of modernity's futile effort to replace the beliefs that have been discarded.” It conveys that this image does not tell us only of the poet’s feeling, but its impact is cast on the outer world also. The poet has aptly used the image to objectify his emotion. “The powerful comparison between the worthlessness of “rats’ feet over broken glass...” (line 9) to their “dry voices” (line 5) illustrates how meaningless they (the Hollow Men) truly are” (Look inside).

The Use of Impersonal Images

“This is a powerful poem that rewards repeated readings, revealing different interpretations and images with each successive return” (Brothers Judd). Like “The Waste Land” again the style, in “The Hollow Men”, although complicated to detect exactly what is going on in the poem, the reader easily perceives the overall feeling of the hopelessness, despair and misery in just the opening lines:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men (1-2)

These lines effectively create a bleak and dismal sensation of barrenness emptiness. Images like This is the dead land / This is cactus land...Under the twinkle of a fading star set up a depressing, dry, desert land surroundings. Comparing the use of literary allusions in “The Waste Land” and in “The Hollow Men”, Willard (2000) is of the view that the allusions in “The hollow Men”, though less vital but they do well to depict the theme of the poem. He, about the allusions, states: “They endow the reader with a deeper understanding of Mr. Eliot’s vision but in the end, the poem stands by itself, a work of its own.” These allusions aid to the understanding of the meaning in an independent and objective manner. They enhance a reader’s capability of appreciating the poem in a way undistorted by the personal emotions and ambitions of the poet himself.

David Spurr finds compatibility between the theme and the technique of the development of the poem. He says: “The ‘Paralysed force, gesture without motion’ applies not only to the men themselves but also to the poem as a whole, which exhibits little narrative progression in the conventional sense and eschews verbs of direct action.” Spurr’s observation makes it clear that the poet’s mind has been portrayed in the poem with utmost conformity to its thoughts. The abstract world of the mind and the concrete and visible shape of the poem are so identical that they truly and objectively represent each

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 4 April 2012

Muhammad Khan Sangi, Ph.D., Abdul Fattah Soomro and Abdul Sattar Gopang, M. Phil.
Scholar:T. S. Eliot’s Indigenous Critical Concepts and “The Hollow Men”

other. This kind of masterly skill helps a reader understand the poem in itself – considering, in Eliot’s words, the poem a thing in itself – without, again and again, looking into the mind of the poet. Spurr further says: “As the hollow men grope together, form prayers to broken stone, and whisper meaninglessly, so the poem itself gropes toward a conclusion only to end in hollow abstraction, broken prayer, and the meaningless circularity of a child's rhyme.” Same is the observation of Nicol (2005), “The images of this landscape construct the hollow men as being resigned to a state of suspension, paralysed by their own inability to turn conception into creation, emotion into response; spiritual redemption their only hope.” The title, the theme and the characters look reinforcing one another to develop the impersonal impression of the poem. This implies that the characters of “The Hollow Men” and the growth of “The Hollow Men” are on the same track and pattern. They go like blueprint for each other. As is aptly said by Vianu (2002): “The real stage of the poem becomes merged with the poet's mind. Eliot's poems replace reality by a mental landscape.”

The Use of Impersonalising Symbols

Vianu further brings in a number of symbols used in the poem to explicate the theme of “The Hollow Men” in an objective manner. He says: “Within the hollow men there is the darkness, the horror, the kingdom of death, the broken Lord’s Prayer. Eliot the poet writes in and about darkness, and feels that an even greater darkness surrounds his very obscure world.” To Vianu the use of the images and symbols is indicative of the poet’s observation of the outer world and thereby its objective representation in his poem. Vianu is of the opinion that the dark and horrible images of Eliot give a sense of ugliness and depression which truly illustrate the condition of the characters in the poem. “We share his confusion and the darkness of his imagination is welcoming. Once we have followed him into the poem and learned how to fill in the blanks, we partake of the new status of the reader” (Vianu:2002). He says that Eliot takes his readers along with himself in such a way as if he wants them not only to understand the poem with the help of their own learning (erudition) but he requires them to write the same kind of poem alongside with him. This is though a great demand on the part of the poet; he wants his readers not only to be critical but creative too. Speaking about the motif of ‘darkness’ that Eliot has inherited, according to Vianu, from Browning’s Dark Tower and Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, Vianu says that to Eliot, darkness is not just a motif but it has become the poem itself. Friedrich and Lawrence(428), discussing the meaningfulness of Eliot’s symbols in the last section of the poem, write: “Eliot, it seems, has appropriated a symbol from the ‘cactus land’ and has given it new significance in the ‘delectable desert’ of this final section.” They say that the symbols used in the poem serve the poet’s purpose to show the characters acting and moving in the desired direction.

Speaking about Eliot’s skill of foregrounding the thematic aspect with the help of befitting images and phrases, Jarvisoolridge (2005) writes: “Eliot juxtaposes strong

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 4 April 2012

Muhammad Khan Sangi, Ph.D., Abdul Fattah Soomro and Abdul Sattar Gopang, M. Phil.
Scholar:T. S. Eliot’s Indigenous Critical Concepts and “The Hollow Men”

ideas together, e.g. ‘paralysed force’ in such a way that they appear to cancel each other out, leaving an emptiness.” Jarvis is talking in the context of the following lines:

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion. (4,11 & 12)

Conveying Targeted Meaning

Jarvis speaks of the antithetical collocation of phrases, which quite unconventionally create an atmosphere of conveying the message of meaninglessness and emptiness. This is actually the life and condition of the hollow men, which the style of the poem is a strong witness upon. “Throughout the five sections of the poem, Eliot uses many words and expressions that reinforce an atmosphere of emptiness and decay: ‘cactus, stone images, fading star, broken stone, dying star, hollow valley, broken jaw, lost kingdom’, etc (Jarvis). Cahill (44) describing the theme and the technique of the poem says: “The hollowness of the hollow men is explored in several of the recurring symbols which appear in the poem.” Part IV contains the familiar images of eyes, stars, and kingdoms. Within this section are the darkest most desolate images of the setting. These include “valley of dying stars...” and “...broken jaw of our lost kingdoms” (lines 54-55). Cahill particularly analyses the symbols of ‘eyes’, ‘death kingdoms’, the ‘guy’ in the epigraph, and the ‘star image’. These symbols have been used repeatedly and consistently to reveal the conditions of the hollow men as conceived by the poet in his mind. The choice of such meaningful images seems to be making justice with the logical development of the poem. They do have an important effect on exposing the poet’s mind to his readers. Cahill quotes lines from the poem:

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams;
Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death’s other kingdom
At the door of death’s other kingdom

Terry (133) speaks of the meaningfulness of the images used to depict the abstract ideas facing the poet. He writes, The Hollow Men enacts the despairing voyage of verification. Images, tantalizing or terrifying, remain echoes and fragments in mankind’s abortive effort to make sense of a history of wisdom and spirituality:

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 4 April 2012

Muhammad Khan Sangi, Ph.D., Abdul Fattah Soomro and Abdul Sattar Gopang, M. Phil.
Scholar:T. S. Eliot’s Indigenous Critical Concepts and “The Hollow Men”

And the descent
Falls the shadow

Terry says that here the poet may have had the thoughts personally but when he feels the actuality of his felt thoughts, the expression automatically turns into an objective reality. Although, we find traces of being personal in tone and style, the use and choice of images again makes the poem give impersonal feeling. In case of Eliot, the felt thought is never confined to the poet himself; it is rather harmonized with the universal truths, which give Eliot's poetry a solid impersonal impression. However in 'Hollow Men' the aspect of personal arrangement cannot be easily neglected. Here the poet seems to be emotional more than usual while communicating his feelings to his readers. Yet when we look at the images in the poem, the description does take an impersonal tone meeting out the poet's acclaimed idea.

Tradition and "The Hollow Men"

Eliot has had much inspiration from Conrad's Heart of Darkness to write his poem "The Hollow Men". One of the main parallels between Conrad's Heart of Darkness and "The Hollow Men" is given in the theme, inherent throughout the latter, of degradation through the elimination of good, of hopelessness through resulting fault and responsibility (Smith: 13). Like Kurtz of Heart of Darkness, the characters in "The Hollow Men" have been shown afflicted with despair and doom. Thus, Eliot has started his poem by linking it with a prominent work of past, hence trying to acquaint his readers with the works he himself regards worth reading and appealing to quote. There are a number of other such references showing Eliot's adherence to up hold his concept of tradition in "The Hollow Men". From mythical to literary to historical allusions have been used to substantiate the desired theme of the poem. An association between the straw man and the Fisher King is quite easily to understand because Eliot's seems to have reenacted the characters of hollow men with the suffering and anguish of the disfigured Tiresias (Smith)

Alluding to Past Works/Writers

Vianu (2005) finds a recurrent theme of darkness in the poem which he traces out to have come from earlier works. He says, "The motif of darkness translated from Robert Browning's Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came to Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and T.S. Eliot's The Hollow Men." With Browning darkness is a theme – a threat to life, which is ultimately conquered by the dramatic persona. With Conrad darkness is the depiction of unknown subconsciousness with its entire dreadfulness. Since Eliot intends to portray the miserable side of his time and people, he has expanded this sense of darkness with its bleak aspects, "which Eliot prolongs by quoting as a motto to his "Hollow Men", 'Mistah Kurtz—he dead', and we remember that Kurtz bequeathed to

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 4 April 2012

Muhammad Khan Sangi, Ph.D., Abdul Fattah Soomro and Abdul Sattar Gopang, M. Phil.
Scholar:T. S. Eliot's Indigenous Critical Concepts and "The Hollow Men"

the reader his ultimate truth: ‘the horror! the horror!’ (Vianu, 2005). Conrad and Eliot, Vianu points out, share the technique of building a relationship between writer and reader through their characters’ account.

Characteristics of Past Works

According to Smith a number of symbols, events and characters have been adopted from the literary works and history of Europe to make out the theme of “The Hollow Men”. The scarecrow symbol reminds us of Yeats’s poem, “Sailing to Byzantium” in which he speaks of “tattered coat upon a stick” which describes ineffectiveness and spiritual weakness. The celebration of the burning in of the effigy on the fifth of November itself echoes the custom of the condemning guilt of trying to jeopardise the masses, where as on the other hand Guy Fawkes Day is commemorated to pay tribute to the sincere services of so called Guy Fawkes. Where an allusion works directly, it is inserted as it is, but when some sort of amendment is required, Eliot fits the allusion accordingly. Referring to the end of the poem Smith says, “The first four lines of Part V parody The Mulberry Bush, substituting for the fertility symbol connoting love (as in the legend of Pyramus and Thisbe) an image purely phallic.”

Like so many other critics, Miller (p.15) has also depicted Dante’s influence on Eliot. The condition of the hollow men, in the poem, is depicted by Miller as: “Their (the hollow men’s) state is defined as that of the trimmers in the third canto of the Inferno, those wretched souls, "gathered on this beach of the tumid river". Gillis et al (p. 634) also point out Dante’s style in applying the kind of imagery, Eliot has used in The Hollow Men. They say, “For the scene and imagery of The Hollow Men is based upon the third canto of Dante’s Inferno, which describes a desolate plain lying between Hell’s portal and the river Acheron on which a horde of souls pursue a whirling banner round and round.”

Fussell (254) has traced out Shakespearian Julius Caesar in the making of a few lines and theme of The Hollow Men. He says that the pattern of a number of lines is a strong reminiscence of a soliloquy by Brutus when he is in a state of great confusion regarding joining the conspirators or to part with them. He quotes the following lines from Julius Caesar:

Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.
The genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of a man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection. II. I, 63 – 69

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 4 April 2012

Muhammad Khan Sangi, Ph.D., Abdul Fattah Soomro and Abdul Sattar Gopang, M. Phil.
Scholar:T. S. Eliot’s Indigenous Critical Concepts and “The Hollow Men”

He compares these lines with the following lines from *The Hollow Men*:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the shadow.

Eliot's Emulation

This clearly shows Eliot's interest of keeping the predecessor's works all alive and active for the modern men. His practice of walking on the footsteps of his forerunners is not limited only to the well-reputed artists, but the writers not so much known are also alluded at a number of places. This way he has been keeping up his idea of including the minor poets in the over all stream of the European literature. Gleckner (26) speaks of the very title of the poem taken from a line of Julius Caesar. He quotes:

There are no tricks in plain and simple faith;
But hollow men, like horses hot and hand,
Make gallant show and promise of their mettle;
But when they should endure the bloody spur
They fall their crests, and, like deceitful jades,
Sink in the trial. (Julius Caesar, IV. 22-27)

Gleckner, further, says that by his talent of emulation, Eliot has rather made the borrowing of the title richer than found in the original context. He points out the feelings and condition of the characters in *The Hollow Men*, "The sickening and decaying of love in this passage, for example, is pertinent to the unbridged gulf between lustful desire and potency on the one hand and the meaningful completeness of creation and the active existence of love on the other, presented in section V of "The Hollow Men".

Friedrich and Lawrence (426), in their article, have taken the issue of the interpretation of the word 'empty' used in the line of "The Hollow Men": The hope only / Of empty men. They are of the view that in a number of critics' works, this word has been taken as synonym to 'hollow', which, according to them is not correct. They interpret the word 'empty' positively as something full of hope and desire. They speak of it as an essential stage in the uplifting spiritual journey. "So understood, emptiness is not synonymous with hollowness in the poem"(427). The source of this interpretation, they have given, is very important. They have quoted a Spanish literary work to prove their point of view. They write: "A striking precedent can be found in the writings of the Spanish Carmelite, St. John of the Cross. Empty is one of the key words in St. John's *Dark Night of the Soul*

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 4 April 2012

Muhammad Khan Sangi, Ph.D., Abdul Fattah Soomro and Abdul Sattar Gopang, M. Phil.
Scholar: T. S. Eliot's Indigenous Critical Concepts and "The Hollow Men"

and Ascent of Mount Carmel; in these works the word is used not in the sense of 'hollow' but of 'receptive, capable of being filled.' They further say that the influence of the Spanish works, especially of St. John's is very much visible in Eliot's later works. This has also been pointed out by Leonard Unger, talking of "Ash Wednesday" and "Four Quartets". This type of critical interpretation shows the connection of Eliot's works with the continental literature, which is what he wanted to maintain in his works.

Ricks (11) finds an allusion to Stevenson's Ebb-Tide in The Hollow Men. He writes, "But most telling to my mind, is that the Ebb-Tide is a world of damnation, like and unlike that of the hollow men, unmanned there in their limbo." He quotes lines and passages from the Ebb-Tide, which not only in theme but in structure and the word-alliteration too resemble the ones in "The Hollow Men". The matters of salvation, damnation and the human evil are the ideas Ricks finds common in the two works. He substantiates his thought by writing, "Perhaps, too, Eliot's gripping word 'Headpiece' owes something not only to Stevenson's succeeding 'Tail-Piece' but to the most bizarre moment in this chapter of The Ebb-Tide, the sudden sight of headpieces" (13). Ricks says that this allusion has also been mentioned by Robert Crawford in his famous essay *Savage and city in the Works of T S Eliot*.

About the end of the poem, Vianu remarks, "If Browning is a victor, if Conrad is strong enough to look death in the face, Eliot chooses the whimper and makes poetry out of what is left after the feast of traditional poetry."

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 4 April 2012

Muhammad Khan Sangi, Ph.D., Abdul Fattah Soomro and Abdul Sattar Gopang, M. Phil.
Scholar:T. S. Eliot's Indigenous Critical Concepts and "The Hollow Men"

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 4 April 2012

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