



## A Thematic Investigation into T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men:" With Reference to Textual Approach

Mariwan Hasan,<sup>1</sup>

Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature, University of Sulaimani,  
Sulaymaniyah, Iraq

### Article ID

CLS-1908-1022

### Article Info

Received Date: 1 June 2019

Reviewed Date: 7 August 2019

Accepted Date: 16 September 2019

### Suggested Citation

Hasan, M. "A Thematic Investigation into T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men:" With Reference to Reader-Response Approach." *Critical Literary Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2019, pp. 159-184.

---

<sup>1</sup> mariwan152@live.com



## Abstract

The current paper provides an analytical study of Eliot's poem, "The Hollow Men." The methods that have been employed in this research are textual and reader-response analyses. The poem has been explored from both approaches in order to know the first impression of the researcher of the poem and backed by critics' notions of the poem. The study thus intends to shed light on two main themes including religion, spirituality, meaninglessness and nothingness. It also tends to demonstrate how Eliot portrays his own view on the modern men and the modern life through this poem. Eliot believes that modern men are hollow from their insides, and they are empty yet filled with straw just like a scarecrow. The paper tackles the critics' views on Eliot, Eliot's view on modernity, and the role of tradition and intertextuality in Eliot's poetry. The paper finally depicts major themes in the poem. Eliot, in his quest for finding a satisfying religion, penned "The Hollow Men" as a mirror to the conditions of the society after the World War I which caused suffering from lack of faith, religion and morality.

## Keywords

Modern Poetry, Modern World, Nothingness, Hollow Men, Spirituality

## 1. Introduction

The poem indicates the dead end of the modern life. The poet is worried about his inner experiences, thus he expresses hopelessness and poverty of modern life, which is free of beauty in his poem. The poem ends with broken fragments from the Lord's Prayer that shows the disability of the Hollow Men even to pray. It has been provided with two epigraphs; one pointing to a basic contrast and the other a basic



resemblance. “The Hollow Men” is a poem that expresses the spiritual deadness, horror and despair (Batra, 2001: 80-81).

Modern poetry has a long, varied and tangled history. Modernist poems are some of the twentieth century’s major cultural achievements, but they are also hard works to read (Howarth, 2011). Linearly, in the present study the focus is on the first half of Modern Poetry rather than on the poets who came into appearance roughly between 1900 and 1950. Needless to state that at the early stage, poets like Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and their progenies were the path breakers and finders. Their period as M. L. Rosenthal rightly asserts was the heroic age of modern poetry. The great trio, Pound, Yeats and Eliot affected a clean break with the Victorian tradition. They deliberately moved away from the sensuousness picturing of queens in Victorian poetry (qtd. in Nair, 2015: 1).

There are many different definitions for the terms ‘modern’ and ‘modern poetry’ in plenty works of various authors and critics. The word modernism is greatly used to introduce new and different characteristics in the forms, subjects, ideas, and styles of arts, in the decades of the twentieth century, particularly the literary works of post-World-War-I (Abrams, 1999: 167). The simplest definition of the word can be derived from the fifth edition of Longman dictionary (2009). It is stated there that the term ‘modern’ is referring to the present time or the most recent time; for instance modern art, music and literature use styles that have been recently improved and are very different from the traditional and the past style. On the other hand, a more problematic definition is presented by the ninth edition of Oxford dictionary of English (2009-2018) which says that the term is related to recent times as opposed to the distant past. Moreover, according to P. M. Patil the word ‘modern’ encompasses more than just a chronological description. It delineates a different kind of imagination, by means of its unique themes, forms, conditions and modes of creation, and the interconnection of various works in creation of an imaginative whole. Therefore, rituals of the modern literature are greatly different from the past literary tradition (2012: 21).

Poetry is any type of verbal or written language that aims to tell a story, or express any sort of emotion, idea, or state of being. There are certain forms and patterns that poets follow in the composition process of their works. Most of these forms agree with the traditional definition of rhythmic poetry; elegy, narrative, ode, ballad, sonnet,



sestina, free verse, and epic are the most significant forms of the traditional or classic poetry (Ollila and Jantas, 2006: 1). Modern poetry is considered as anti-traditional poetry of inclusions that highly stands against "Victorianism" as poetry of exclusions. Therefore, one can say that the term modern refers to the newest methods and styles that are different from what has been used in the past.

The revolutionary acts in poetic forms and contents are the most considering fact of the twentieth century due to English lyric poetry that resulted in the denial of the earlier poetic taste and practice. Modern (as the first half of the twentieth century was referred to) English lyric poetry in all various manifestation remains an unbelievably effective way of empowering a rich variety of human experience and "criticizing life."

The changes that have happened in the realms of thought, emotion, revelations and the like, have been enriching the modern English poetry. The dramatic changes that have happened in the intellectual and physical mores, aesthetic, political, social and economic aspects of men life have incorporated with the progressive modern poetry. Regarding the mention dramatic changes, modern poetry has some distinctive characteristics like the way allusion, myth, fragmented and non-linear forms, often from non-Western tradition are used in it. Another instance can be the use of symbolism in cases, which appears influential regarding various movements like Imagism, Vorticism, Surrealism, and Objectivism. To sum up them modern poetry reflects modern social changes in its theme and setting while experiments new forms and styles (Patil, 2012: 21-22).

The human everyday concerns as the central core of poem is one of the distinctive features of the modern English poetry. This is the reason why men pictured in modern English poetry is involved in an atmosphere of disillusionment or apathy, tension or guilt, anger or bitterness. This type of poetry is not ashamed of describing a world that has been through two Worlds Wars, the Nazi concentration camps, economic crisis and depression, intellectual changes, genocide and the constant threat of a nuclear war. Nevertheless, the significant point about England modernist poets is that they were under a great influence by French symbolism, the American imagists, and the writings of Ezra Pound.

The primary deviation of modern poetry from the late Victorian poetry happened with the arrival of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, particularly in the exploration of form



and attitude to human experience. Both Pound and Eliot, each one of them in his own way, made a revolution in the poetry of the twentieth century. Other significant modernist figure in poetry can be listed as follow; Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, A. E. Housman, Walter de la Mare, G. M. Hopkins, W. H. Auden, Spender, Louis Macheice, Day Lewis, Dylan Thomas, D. H. Lawrence (Patil, 2012: 22).

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) who is the major modern poet often considered being one of the most complex poets of the twentieth century. He is aware of disintegration of moral values in the contemporary society and of the spiritual bankruptcy of the age. All the characters of his early poetry suffer from inertia, distrust and spiritual emptiness. For example, his “The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock” shows a great number of modernistic characteristics. The people and the major character of “The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock” appear to be paralyzed which points to the meaningless of time and lives (Patil, 2012: 24).

## 2. Literature Review

The presenting section aims to delve into the previously prepared studies on the same or similar topic to this research. Since there are too many works concentrated on the works of T. S. Eliot, particularly his poetry, a focused analysis of the studies appears in appropriate here for it will cover many pages. Thus the researcher decided to directly list some of the most recent and important critical researches and just point to their general gist.

With the aim of collecting other studies on the same topic, the researcher found a paper addressed as “Challenging the Faith: T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” And the Abolition of Religion.” The article, written by Asep Subhan in 2014, aims at analyzing “The Hollow Men” in relation to the theme of religion. It focuses on describing Eliot’s idea on religions through “The Hollow Men”

There is another research paper written by Salim Kadhim Abbas titled as “Spiritual and Emotional Sterility in T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’” (2016) which attempts to carry Eliot’s theme and mood through “The Hollow Men.” This is to argue the state of emotional and spiritual infertility in particular. Haider Jebur Mihsin also published an article addressed as “Allusion in T. S. Eliot's ‘The Hollow Men’” in 2014. The paper concerns with the idea of strategic literary in Eliot’s “The Hollow Men.” He points to



the usage of Allusion by the means of quoting images, events, and characters from the literary works of the past times. The article thoroughly treats the alluded works in Eliot's literary works.

Besides, an article by Stephen Adebayo Ogunpitan in 2017 entitled "Art Versus Racism: T. S. Eliot's the Hollow Men and Black Identity" attracted the researcher's attention. The article attempts to analyze and interpret Eliot's poetry in relation of racial prejudice and intolerance. The article claims that everything can be observed in terms of the Western conservative viewpoint on politics, culture, and man's fate in the modern world.

Another significant article on Eliot's poetry was written by by Joanna Stolarek in 2014. As the title of its suggests, "Quest for values in T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" and "Ash Wednesday," the article's aim is to present the importance of and search for values in T. S. Eliot's poetry. She analyzes the two selected poems of Eliot, one written before and the other written after the artist's conversion into Catholicism; first, "The Hollow Men" and second, "Ash Wednesday."

The present research however presents a brand new reading of T. S. Eliot's poetry pieces, particularly "The Hollow Men." Presenting research deals with the text of the poems with an eye on the Barthesian reader-response approach. In this way the result of this study is expected to add to the readers' understanding of this modernist poet. Additionally the study paves a new way to scholars for further interpretation of Eliot's literary works.

### 3. Critical Consideration

#### 3.1. Critics' Views on T. S. Eliot as a Poet

There are different viewpoints on T. S. Eliot as a modernist poet and it is vital to shed light on some few of them. According to Patil he is the most prolific poet and critic of modern period. He was not only a poet for he wrote drama, prose and acted as an editor for *The Criterion*. He came to light with his most famous work, "The Waste Land." The massive criticizing of T. S. Eliot's works caused him to almost dominate the kingdom of poetry in modern age. Therefore, twentieth century is known as The Age of Eliot (2012: 98-99).



As Vianu believes there is no neutral critic regarding T. S. Eliot; critics whether praised him or blamed him. The well-known critics have brought to life the excellence of Eliot as a dramatist, poet and critic (2002: 13). For example Warren in his essay praises the poet and states that “it is not possible for me to think of T. S. Eliot as dead.” Even while he talks about T. S. Eliot, he uses the present tense and states that it would be difficult for him to use past tense while describing Eliot. There is a general agreement among serious readers of Anglo-American poetry and criticism, Warren suppose, that Eliot became a master of poetry and criticism and that consequents “improvements” cannot deviate him from that position. His rank in contemporary poetry is with Yeats. Evidence for claiming Eliot’s majesty is “[t]he Nobel Prize for literature awarded to him in 1948 confirmed him as a citizen of world literature” (Vianu, 2002: 4). In criticism, his status is quite as isolate and he is not an easy critic to summarize. He is ready to defend his literary creed; but, in spite of an increasing shift of interest from poetry and aesthetic analysis to sociological and theological interpretation of art, he has refused to make the case for political or theological truth rest upon such arguments as a literary amateur can provide. Despite his pontifical style, of which he is aware, Eliot is a shy, self-distrustful, and a spiritually humble man (2002: 272- 274).

Eliot’s poetry marked a clear abandon of nineteenth century literary conventions which revealed originality and inventiveness regarding the use of words. One of Eliot’s most perceptive critics, Helen Gardner, finds the way Eliot used language as the most certain sign of Eliot’s greatness as a modernist poet. The language quality of Eliot’s poetry is best conveyed through one of his famous phrase which is “auditory imagination.” Eliot is not only a significant poet of the modern age but also he is a distinguishable critic of literature at his age. In fact, he is among the most important and greatest poet-critics of all time and his critical works is comparable in significance to the work of Dryden, Dr. Johnson, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold (Chatterjee, 2017: 7-8).

On the contrary, some other well-known critics have violently reacted against Eliot and accusatively described him. All these accusations illustrate the confusion of most readers facing works of poets, playwrights or critics who refuses to be devoted to the traditional premises (Vianu, 2002: 13). In addition, some critics have criticized T. S.



Eliot for turning from history which can be rejected with claiming *The Waste Land* as a war poem; its disarrangement and fragmentation echo the wondering experience of the war as the poem alludes to events of the previous ten years (Patil, 2012: 6). However, according to some other critics like Charles Powell attempted to inform everyone, *The Waste Land* was only "waste paper" (Vianu, 2002: 6).

### 3.2. Eliot's Views on Modern Men

In Eliot's literary works, he tries to express the unpleasantness of modernity and materialistic lifestyle of modern men. His concern about the outcomes of the modern time caused him to be known as the spokesperson of the modern age. He has expressed the noticeable feelings and anxieties exposed to modern man through the complexity of the modern period. Eliot, due to his own life's conditions and his different temperament, led across every movement during the modern era. Eliot's poetry, criticism and memories are made of actual life experience. That is why his works create a romantic atmosphere. Eliot in his life time was under the influences of social life surrounding him and world's politics include crucial concepts, sensitivity, and alertly responsibility. He represents all these characteristics in his dream form literary works. Therefore, Eliot can be called as remarkable ideologist of the modern age.

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, "The Hollow Men" and "Ash Wednesday" imply the very true and exact image of modern men in poetry. They give the idea of moving from spiritual infertility to hope for "salvation." In this regard Leavis states that T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is "great and positive achievement" and is excellent discretion of the life of modern human. The problems of modern people especially after the World Wars have become extremely complicated. They are going through a situation which could be called life-in-death; they are living under the fear of death all the time like "in a handful of dust" (Burial of the Dead). Moral values have lost their nobility in modern time, for instance deviant sex became an inseparable part and parcel of modern men's daily lives. In fact, innocence is considered as perversion. Every modernist being is lost and having no hope of salvation just like J. Alfred Prufrock. They are like "heap of broken images" in the waste and barren land (Burial of the Dead), where "the dead tree gives no shelter, cricket no relief" (Burial of the Dead).





Men have lost true sense and feeling for others, and because of that, love does not prevail. As an example of this loveless situation, after a mechanical love making, the typist girl feels happy and glad when the job is “over” (The Fire Sermon). This illustrates the stereotypical notion of thought that women are only instruments for men’s enjoyment and at their best a children birthing device. In Eliot’s eyes, personal enjoyment and human greed resulted in decreasing the faith in God. The busy human crossing the London Bridge at time of crucifixion of Christ, nine in the morning, indicates the humiliated faith and the absent of religion and spiritual beliefs in modern time.

### 3.3. “The Hollow Men” and “Ash Wednesday”

“The Hollow Men” is a short poem which provides a nice portrayal of modern people. In the poem, the spiritual decay and spiritual paralysis are the main causes of human suffering: “Shape without form.../ Paralysed force...” Modern man has been filled with emptiness like scarecrow moving in a blow of wind is filled with straw. He feels no dynamism from inside of himself and is always dependent to the social system that is an offspring of the modernity (Part II). In, “The Hollow Men” speaker says:

This is the dead land  
This is cactus land  
Here the stone images  
Are raised ....

The image of stone refers to the lines of *The Waste Land* where Eliot compares modern human and stony rubbishes to each other. It is to say that modern men have become stone-hearted; vacuity, emptiness and nihilism colonized them savagely.

However the detailed format of portraying modern man is not followed in “Ash Wednesday,” modern man have been described as it is described in *The Waste Land*. It is obvious that modern man is barren spiritually and in need of moral purification. Therefore, religion can be considered the best solution for modern man. The religious follower’s conflicts are going through four things that are self-exploration, self-examination, moving towards the path of spirituality and penitence.

Eliot’s view on modern subjects can be showed in three groups. The hypocrisy of man, modern human beings’ lack of communication, and the problem of social



isolation are three fundamental problematic conditions of modern men that result in alienation. These subjects are commonly used in T. S. Eliot's poetry.

### 3.4. Hypocrisy, Lack of Communication, and Isolation

The sense of hypocrisy and duplicity of the modern men is one of the main motive in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In the poem the main character, Prufrock, is helplessly caught in an endless quarrel between his own desire to live by himself and the obligation to submit to the social agreements. Eliot wants to illustrate the representative of modern man in the society by using the character of Prufrock. The self Prufrock proposing is an artificial self that have to be articulate as Eliot says:

There will be time; there will be time to prepare  
a face to meet the faces that you meet (Lines 26-27).

In "The Love Song," lack of communication existing in the party represents a greater lack of communication that exists in society. These lacks are other basic subjects of Eliot poetry. Prufrock is incapable of communicating with the people around him, either men or women. Others also suffer from the same problem as they are not able to have a positive relation with him as well. Inability of having communication is a hidden epidemic problem in modern era. Prufrock is the only one who is aware of this truth; however, other peoples in the poem, drawn in false consciousness, think of having conversation.

In the room the women come and go  
Talking Michelangelo. (Lines 13-14; 35-36)

The theme of isolation is also a significant theme in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." As Prufrock is unable to appear in the public, the poem tends to demonstrate man as a creature isolated from the community. Prufrock is conflicting between two different selves: first, a self-living isolated man and second, a socially involved man trying to communicate with others. In the poem these two selves appears as encountering with each another. This implies that human relations are inevitably unsuccessful and useless.

"The Love Song" is an interior monologue that indicates Prufrock's isolation. In this sense, all the actions happen in the speaker's mind yet he does nothing. In other



words, Prufrock is trapped in a Hamletian situation. He is far from the actual world causes him the lack of agency, if there is any, do take an action. He cannot spend an enjoyable time with others and if he can spend time with other, the troubles would ruin the adjective of 'enjoyable' for him. Consequently the three features hypocrisy, lack of communication, and isolation are observable as three basic difficulties that Prufrock suffers from. The modern society premises are the participating superstar in the situations which end in mentioned difficulties. Prufrock, who represents the modern men, appears to be responsible for his sufferings as everything happens inside him. Consequently, Prufrock becomes alienated from his true self. This matter indicates Eliot's vision of the modern men.

### 3.5. The Concept of Tradition

Tradition symbolizes the past as inherited knowledge that can be studied by modern theorists and authors. The common key meaning of tradition is usually transmitted from customs and practices of the past. Every author follows a sort of tradition inherited from previous thinkers and artists. The tradition of Eliot does not mean only imitation or blindly devoting to the way of the writers of the past. The relation between an author and a tradition, from Eliot point of view, is a two-ways road; the tradition influences the author's works and the author modifies that tradition. Eliot, as a critic, observes the significance of tradition in terms of the authors, the works, and the thought of the past as a whole. In a more comprehensive sense, it is not merely limited to literary tradition, but it also refers to social, historical, political, ideological, cultural, and economical tradition of the past. (qtd. in Mahdi, 2017: 245)

Tradition can be applied to the use of the literary devices like allusion and epigraphs. In this manner, *The Waste Land* stays Eliot's richest poem of tradition because it associations to create great images and manifold voices and rhythm. However, in accordance of artistic structure "The Hollow Men" can be seen prior to *The Waste Land*. "The Hollow Men" is generally invites the readers to go through it in a very impressive scene of history and books; this invitation is like the ones Joseph Conrad's 1902 novella *Heart of Darkness*, William Shakespeare's 1599 play "Julius Caesar," and Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* do in their works. Linearly, Eliot's great



coverage of the traditional sources enriches and brightens the poem (qtd.in Mahdi, 2017: 247).

According to Eliot, in his January 1935 letter, the title "The Hollow Men" was invented by means of combining one word from William Morris's romance "The Hollow Land," with another word from Rudyard Kipling's *The Broken Men* (qtd. in Mahdi, 2017: 247). Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* also inspired Eliot at the time of composing "The Hollow Men." One of the main similarities between the poem and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is inserted as a thematic aspect in the poem. The inherent theme in the latter part of the poem pictures the elimination of good resulting in the hopelessness of modern men.

Like Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness*, the characters in "The Hollow Men" have been shown to be suffering from self-destruction and hopelessness. Eliot introduces his work to the readers with taking advantage of remarkable works form past. Several references highlight Eliot's devotion to his idea of tradition in "The Hollow Men." Various mythical, literary, and historical allusions have been used to support the main themes of the poem. For instance, the relation between the straw man and the Fisher King is easy to be interpreted, as Eliot appears to have reenacted the characteristics of the suffering and torments of the disfigured Tiresias in "The Hollow Men" (qtd. in Sangi, Soomro, and Gopang 479).

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. The Hollowness of the Modern Men

According to Thomas Parkinson the term modern man, is invented by modern poetry to raise the skepticism of modern people (qtd. in Barzinji, 2013: 1). This means that there are men who doubt in the essence of modernity that T. S. Eliot has described them in his poems while he highlights their worldwide problems (Barzinji, 2013: 1). In other words, the modern man is a creature in conflict with the modern community. The modern community which itself is barren, ineffectual, and vague, is perfectly represented in Eliot's poetry (Barzinji, 2013: 99).

Two various kinds of "Hollow/Stuffed men" exist in Eliot's "The Hollow Man;" first, the one that shortages a soul (Mister Kurtz) and second, the one who lacks a real body (Guy Fawkes dummy). These hollow men symbolize both physical emptiness



and spiritual emptiness of modern subjects (Barzinji, 2013: 95). According to Sara Thorne “The Hollow Men” is the indication of a low point spirituality in which the speaker represents a state of hopelessness and hollowness (qtd. in Barzinji, 2013: 95). The lines reflect the modern people, who wailing their emptiness and their sense of life. They are not “lost violent souls,” rather they are hollow men that stuffed with straw (Barzinji, 2013: 95).

“The Hollow Men” 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. The hollowness comes from the loss of faith and belief in humanity (Barzinji, 2013: 96). It is a hollowness caused by the circumstance of the modern world and modern community; the circumstance that forced men to live for the sake of ‘self’ rather than ‘selves.’ Linearly, the modern subjects are incapable of choosing between evil and good. In the poem, the souls whose condition is supposed to be horrifying are not those who have the most sins, but those who cannot recognize the border between sin and right. They are in a blurred state in-between; a state that their unsuccessfulness to make a decision results in an extreme lack of hope, joy, and pain. The heroes of this poem are those who obviously observe this manner and recognize the true horrible face of the modernity (Barzinji, 2013: 98).

Eliot ends the poem by shortening and breaking the final lines of the poem in order to highlight and point out the violent, meaningless conflict of modern human beings against their fatal circumstances. Therefore, “The Hollow Men” is Eliot’s imagination of modern worshippers. They those who are filled with the endemic “shadow,” something in the middle of uninterested and lack of conscience, and definitely the sense of prophesying of mortality (Barzinji, 2013: 99).

## 4.2. The Significance of Repentance

As a sin is a denial of God, repentance then is returning to God. Moreover, sin is a disagreement with God, so repentance is reconciliation with God. A real repentance is a strong desire to return to the origin of humanity and purity, which it was taken away from human. In a metaphoric way of telling, repentance is a wish in the left behind heart that is far from God. In this regard, repentance happened while a heart believes that it cannot be much further away from God (Shenouda, 1990: 13). To be



more precise, repentance "is an opportunity for beginning a new page that God Forgives you for your past deeds. And He shall purify you and you shall be pure and whiter than snow" (qtd. in Shenouda, 1990: 19). It is an opportunity that can be a source for hope and getting rid of despair. Repentance is a door opening to forgiveness, mercy, and life; a bridge making the lost connection between heaven and earth, once more (Shenouda, 1990: 19).

During his life, T. S. Eliot conflicted with religion and belief (Sarin, 2008: 2). In his pre-conversion writing, Eliot viewed religion as a key to solve the problems raised by modernity for he argues that without religion, society turns into a wasteland. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot was conflicting to understand that how knowledge, experience, belief, and skepticism, all work together with the aim of influencing the culture. Moreover, how they influenced Eliot's sense of self (qtd. in Sarin, 2008: 3). Evidently, "The Hollow Men" that is written just before Eliot's official turning to the Anglican faith, clarifies this questioning. Eliot does not want the readers not to embrace his word; on the contrary, he just wants the society to question their beliefs (Sarin, 2008: 15).

The people in the poem do things as they are told to do. They whisper their prayers; they behave at the service, as they should instead of thinking about their beliefs and their acts. Hence, the prayer is a hollow act. The act of questioning demonstrates the presence of a critical mind. Following the rituals without having a clear interpretation of the matter is a doomed act that leads to the greater failure. People put no effort on criticizing neither their religious belief nor their Secular modern way of life. In daily life, the lack of religion does not necessarily create a hoard of people that believe in the non-existence of God.

People who suffer from the inability of thinking go to church on Sunday in way that the "hollow men" go to church. Even the very act of praying is empty from any sincere potency. They "supplicate" to images like art museum visitor that means that a vast number of them cannot even interpret the very primary theme of the works. In other words, the praying became a habit for people in the modern time.

Eliot as a temperate figure, who ambitiously wants the people to devote to themselves to religion and faith, apparently stands against Eliot who insists on critical thinking. Nevertheless, the point in here is that Eliot does not reject faith and religion



rather he suggests that every man must follow a religion that is selected through critical observation of the follower.

Although Eliot finally turned to Christianity and used Christian references very much, the use of these references was not to force anyone to turn Christian. His aim was to encourage society in the West to go through their religious beliefs once again, to question, and think critically. His encounter with society was less about a lack of religion and faith and more about the lack of a critical faith. He found the society in need of a convert to religious exploration and discussion (Sarin, 2008 15-17).

### 4.3. Intertextuality in “The Hollow Men”

Manjola Nasi states that “The concept of intertextuality emerges in literary theory several decades after T. S. Eliot had written some of the most influential poems and pieces of criticism of the twentieth century, but the notion is nevertheless applied both theoretically and in practice to Eliot’s work ” (2009: 1). There are seven different types of intertextuality; despite this number is open to addition or reduction. These seven types divide into three categories. The first category consists of four types: Revision, Translation, Quotation, and Sources. The second category consists of three types: Conventions, Configurations, and Genres. The third category consists of Paralogues (Miola, 2014: 13-23).

Epigraphs are a short line that can be added distinctly in advanced position as an introductory phrase for the sake of foreshadowing the essential parts of the poem. Eliot used two different lines from different cultures as epigraphs for “The Hollow Men” that are distinctively referred to several centuries and a richness of background details (Jaleel, 2016: 130). The epigraph of the poem is “Mistah Kurtz- he dead./ A penny for the Old Guy.” As Murphy asserts, Eliot wisely combines two totally separated allusions in order to make the epigraph to “The Hollow Men;” it appears that two statements are following one after another. (qtd. in Jaleel, 2016: 130).

The importance of the epigraph is to make an opposition between the status of the hollow human to the protagonist of Joseph Conrad and the Gun Powder plot of the Old Guy Fawkes. The two stories belong to different periods of time and different cultural sources. In Mr. Kurtz’s case, he is an empty soul slave-trader in Africa. On the other hand, the effigy of Guy Fawkes is set in contrast to the state of the empty



men of the modern eras and times. The story of the Guy Fawkes has a historical refer to the 1600's and what is known as the Gun Powder plot; the story of a failure of Guy blowing the Parliament of England up (Jaleel, 2016: 130).

#### 4.4. Hope and Nihilism in the T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men"

"The Hollow Men" is one of the most famous poems that have been written by T. S. Eliot in the second phase of his creative career; reach out from 1919 to 1926. It was published in 1925. In "The Hollow Men" one can hear the voice of the empty men whispering and talking in a soliloquy. The way of making up of the soliloquy immediately strikes the reader as it is written in cut piece images and irregular rhythm (Ghosh, 2006: 198).

This poem itself is made up of pieces of fragments that illustrate written Eliot's emphasis on the confusions of modern existence. In fact, the poem demonstrates the conditions in which human beings suffer from the lack of spirituality. Eliot may be trying to inform the reader that many men are not aware of their own identity. He also dedicates his works to blame society being incapable of creating spirituality and belief (Singh, 2013: 1). An active reader observes the signs of emptiness and hopelessness in the poem. For example in the part one of the poem; the hollow men mourning is requiem for their own hollowness or emptiness. As "Guys" are ready to be burnt, in fact the death appears to be a hopeful guise. The hollow men are the group waiting to be ferried across the miseries and mundane.

In "dream kingdom" of death, Part Two of the poem, the hollow men want to stay hollow and scarecrows-like. This idea is inserted as a visual imaginary into the poem; "Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves..." (qtd. in Batra, 2001: 83). They are afraid of both life and death. The reality of death and the frightening image of life after death scare hollow men as the reality of life in this world appears frightening to them (Batra, 2001: 82-83). Hopeless happens in the poem while hollow men dread the realities such as death and does not have any hope to live. In the third part of the poem, one can state that the primitive religion failed to satisfy the needs of human beings (Batra, 2001: 83). Therefore, while men are not satisfied with their own life, it can be highly assert that this form of life is far from any sign of hope. Regarding the fourth part of the poem, as Batra states, this is only the death that offers hope to men since "the





skeletons huddle together waiting for Charon's boat. Like Tiresias, they are blind" (2001: 84). This notion of waiting causes men a paralyzed situation, which stands along with the hopelessness.

Additionally, Part Five of poem develops the reality which does not develop the hope of hollow men; the cactus does not turn to the rose (Batra, 2001: 84). Finally, instead of hope, there is the bitterness of reality waiting for the hollow men. These all significant points shed light on the phenomenon of nihilism in the poem. Nihilism has been existed in Western culture for about many centuries, but no century has been permeated by nihilism as the twentieth century did. "The Hollow Men," investigates human's lack of interest in and concern of life. These humans know that death is closing in, and they have "the hope only of empty men." The hollow men cannot gather up enough faith to pray, they are actually paralyzed, and for them, the world ends "not with a bang but a whimper" (Manschreck, 1976: 90).

## 5. Major Themes: A Contextual Treatment

### 5.1. Religion and Spirituality

It is significant to shed light on the religion as a term. "The term *religion* is derived from *religare* means *to tie back, tie up, tie fast*" (qtd. in Subhan, 2014: 1, my emphasis). In fact, "[T]he [...] term refers to a concept which encompasses varied sets of traditions, practices, and ideas" (qtd. in Subhan, 2014: 1). There are several organized religions in the world. Among them, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism are the most considerable ones that shares similarities and differences. These differences are the source of uniqueness for these religions (Subhan, 2014: 1).

T. S. Eliot chooses the theme of religion for the "The Hollow Men" due to some particular reasons. Eliot's first reason is the point is that, however in the modern time religions are more significant, most of the people are not aware about the intervention of Capitalism into religious rituals. The second reason pops up from the religion's criticism which is vitally important. The next reason is rooted in religious thought. It is significant to demonstrate that the religions command their followers to use their minds in reinterpreting religious beliefs before their devotion to the rituals (Subhan, 2014: V). "The Hollow Men" is composed at while the aftermath of the World War I



was torturing individuals. Hence, in this poem, Eliot started to investigate new religious beliefs to be a comfort for the wounded subjectivity of the people. Eliot believes that the hollowness grows from the insides of people. Therefore, the spirituality is a fundamental theme that repetitively haunts the reader through the poem (Singh, 2013: 2).

In the poem, Eliot has expressed the spiritual and intellectual hollowness of the modern age in line with the interior struggles of the modern human beings. This poem totally delineates the Twentieth century and the circumstances of its men. The modern men's inactiveness results in their interior struggles. This aspect of the modern life is cleverly inserted in "The Hollow Men" by Eliot. Throughout the inter-war period, poetry reached its significance as the major form of literature after a long time. The poems that have been composed throughout the post-world-wars mirror the tragic darkness and hopelessness of the inter-war period. "The Hollow Men" made a huge influence on the generation of the post-war literature.

Thereupon, it is argued that the immediate sentiment of the aimlessness, ugliness of the modernity, and the emptiness of modern human's spiritual during the years after World War I were responsible for the origin of "The Hollow Men." The poem illustrates that torment and hopelessness of modern men during the World War I aftermath. It highlights the futility, emptiness, and agony of modern life. Furthermore, "The Hollow Men" reflects the difficulties in interpreting the meaning of life and its role in the humans' communication. All these hopelessness, dissatisfaction and despair in the modern human's life, is a result of modern men's inability of finding the cause of and solution for their lack of spirituality (Abbas, 2016: 26).

The speaker on "The Hollow Men" portrays Eliot's concern for cultural, social, individual lack of faith and morality. As a result, 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 (Singh, 2013: 1). Although the men inside the poem try to meet the Mighty, they fail to face the divine power for they do not have eyes. In other words, they intend to be spiritual men but their minds were filled with straw of misdeeds and sin. In fact the actions indicate that the hollow men are drowned in indecision and in confusion that they shall be accepted and listened by God or not (Singh, 2013: 3).



The religion and its followers are described in the poem in a negative way. In Part One of the poem, religion is described as the ideology that gives the deceptive happiness into people. The followers of religion are depicted as the hollow men, the empty men, and the nothing-men whose minds are a useless part of their body. In Part Two, the promises from religion are questioned. Whether God exist or not? In Part Three, the religious promises are depicted as the opposing illusion of the suffering of the real world. In the Part Four, the disputing of God is proposed. In Part Five refusing religious beliefs is proposed by Eliot. Then the outcome of the world without God has been pictured as a world filled with empty men (Subhan, 2014: 47).

Most of the critics have called “The Hollow Men” a ‘personal poem’ for it presents the views of the poet on the modern life (Sangi, Soomro, and Gopang, 2012: 473). The “New Critics” argues that literature have not to be evaluated for its theological and ethical importance because the literary work is described with their modes in using language. Some critics go beyond this perception and conclude that the literature and the religions have nothing to do with each another. Eliot however highly believed that there should be a relationship between these two concepts if modern men seek for both comfort and salvation (Toroczka, Preda, 2014: 126).

T. S. Eliot always conflicts with spirituality and beliefs. He always tries to find out a new form of religious ritual and premises. In the path toward a new religious interpretation, he studied Buddhism, although, the wandering through various religions did not end with Buddhism. Eliot during his life was continuously into the studying religious texts; for instance from Confucian origins and Hindu. Some critics have depicted Eliot’s relationship with religion as a “process of elimination and rejection” (qtd. in Singh, 2013: 3). Eliot did not mean a special hollow person by coining the term ‘Hollow Men’ yet he had demonstrated the actual situation of the post-war Europe in general. Therefore the aim of “The Hollow Men” is to point the matter that God has created human beings for sharing the message of helpful co-existence and love which is against provoking violence, aggressiveness and torturing fellow beings (Singh, 2013: 3).



## 5.2. Meaninglessness and Nothingness

In a January 1935 letter, T. S. Eliot claimed that the title of the poem is coined by combination of the title of a romance by William Morris, "The Hollow Land," and the other poem by Rudyard Kipling addressed as "The Broken Men." Moreover, another suggestion maintains that the title maybe came from "Julius Caesar" by Shakespeare (Mihsin, 2014: 379).

There are no tricks in plain and simple faith, But  
hollow men, like horses hot at 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. (Act V, Sc. 3, line 55) (qtd. in Mihsin, 2014: 379).

While reading the poem, only by focusing on its title one may feel that it is a poem talking about human beings with empty minds and having their insides empty or it portrays how humans' lives are full of emptiness, nothingness and meaninglessness.

The epigraph of the poem relates the empty men with that *Heart of Darkness* and with the Guy Fawkes who was stuffed with straw. Still there is a difference between Guy Fawkes and Kurtz and hollow heroes of the poem; the 'lost/violent souls' at least wanted to exorcize a choice yet the apathetic are known just as effigies. "The Hollow Men" pictures the ones who are in quest of religious beliefs, simultaneously surrounded with pains. Thus, like Kurtz, Eliot's hollow men descent is also impossible to be replaced. Furthered, "The Hollow Men" focuses on moral traditional premises of human history by blaming the lustful acts.

The center of falsehood, in Part Five, 'the prickly pear,' goes around in a whirling circle or a whirlpool motion. Nonetheless, according to "The Hollow Men," the fulfillment of the vision in reality is far away from human imagination. The torment of "Lips that would kiss," the unrelieved "anguish of the marrow/the age of the skeleton," tears the heart apart with harshest desires. The dead people who have gone over to eternity –death kingdom– they look back towards the world in which the hollow men live, and they think how meaningless and empty their world is. "Lost violent souls" like Kurtz and Fawkes are better than the hollow men because they can decide to have



strong and brave acts. There is no doubt that their actions are toward a wrong direction, yet at least they are not trapped in passivity like hollow men.

Kurtz and Fawkes have gone to hell, however they are better than the hollow men that have been rejected by both Heaven and Hell and waiting forever in a region of 'nothingness.' They are like the nothing men of Dante whose souls stay forever in place between Heaven and Hell, which is a sort of nowhere, a realm of nothingness where they are rejected from the plot of Divine Providence. Their movements through lifetime are of useless one signifying nothing and achieving nothing. In "The Hollow Men" the speakers are nothing men; they cannot face the eyes of those who have crossed into Paradise. They also do not think of themselves as lost violent souls, who have chosen Evil, but at least have chosen (qtd. in Bhattacharya, 2015: 208).

In the first section of the poem, the Hollow Men are leaning together nearly like lifeless objects. This way of describing human beings, 'leaning together,' with their heads 'filled with straw' make them appearing as feeble lifeless scarecrows-like objects. Even they cannot stand, think or function on their own. The hollow men themselves and the place they dwell in, are depicted as 'dry' ('our dried voices'; 'in our dry cellar'), which also can be a reference to *The Waste Land*. The meaningless lives they live are obvious in accordance to their 'dried voices' that are 'quiet and meaningless' while they 'whisper together.' They exist and live in a place between Heaven and Hell; they have not crossed over the River Styx yet, in order to go into another place. Those people who have crossed over the river, would recall them only like 'the Hollow Men; the stuffed men.' In this regard, there are some suggestions that tell it is preferable to be a 'lost violent soul' than a 'hollow' and 'stuffed' man. The hollow men are even too shy, fearful and coward to commit the violent acts ('not as lost violent souls').

In the second section of the poem, one of the hollow men depicts that how he fears the 'eyes' of people who made it to be in 'death's dream kingdom,' whether in Heaven or Hell. The hollow men live in a segmented, meaningless and nothingness world of symbols and broken images where the 'eyes' are shown as disconnected from the body. The third section of the poem depicts the setting as infertile and filled with 'stone images' and 'cactus.' The nothing men, even cannot act out the desire of their own ('Lips that would kiss') in this land which is neglected either spiritually or



physically. Instead they are left to say prayers 'to broken stones.' In the section four, the hollow man from section two continues to describe this neglected and empty place as a place where no 'eyes' exist.

Their 'lips' are pictured as disconnected from their bodies and segmented as well. In the third and fourth sections of the poem, the person who tells the story is now in death's 'other' kingdom, and talks from that whether Hell or Heaven. Eliot uses the word 'cactus' to depict the land and making the land look 'dry,' as the voices in the first section. Even the last section of the poem, Part Five, starts with a nursery rhyme about circling a mulberry bushes, yet the children in poem circle and go round a prickly-pear cactus plant instead of mulberry bushes.

The lines of the poem illustrate the hollow men's anxiety and depression. At the end lines, the Mulberry Bush rhyme becomes a musical rhyme that notifies the end of the world. With the warning rhyme, the readers expect the world to be finished with a loud noisy explosion however it ends in a 'whimper' for the hollow men; very quiet, free of any noise, and meaningless. This is in contrast with the narrator's idea that believes the hollow men's world will come to end with an apocalyptic catastrophe because of preventing themselves from being rotted and becoming 'hollow.' (Bhattacharya, 2015: 208-209).

## 6. Conclusion

After reading several significant references on modernism, modern literature and analytical readings of "The Hollow Men," the researcher concludes that there are various viewpoints regarding the emergence of the modern age. "The Hollow Men" expresses hopelessness and spiritual poverty in modern life that is free of beauty. The modern men as well are corrupted empty objects.

Furthermore, the poem demonstrates the spiritual deadness, fearfulness and despair. It is Eliot's imagination of modern religion's followers however the men, addressed by the poem, lack faith and spirituality. T. S. Eliot during his life was in quest of a best-fitted religion and his ninety-five-lined poem, "The Hollow Men," pictures his quest. The poem thus contains religious and spiritual themes however there are some other themes in the poem. "The Hollow Men" reflects the situations



and conditions of the society after World War I. Eliot described the men of his age as hollow men, which are filled with straw and are empty of any thoughts.

Modernity and its consequences, particularly after the World Wars always is a concern for critical thinkers and philosopher. Every great contemporary thinker tends to provide a solution for the modern man conflicting with hopelessness, emptiness, and despair. Eliot also as one of the well-regarded thinkers of the twentieth century offers ways to hollow men in order to escape from the modernity prison that is repentance. Among all the nihilisms, one might think that there must be some hope for the hollow men; however, what Eliot provides for his readers appears to be a bit controversial.





## References

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed., Boston, MA: Thomson, Wadsworth, 1999.
- Abbas, Salim Kadhim. "Spiritual and Emotional Sterility in T.S .Eliot's 'The Hollow Men.'" *Misan Journal for Academic Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 30, 2016, pp. 20-39.
- Barzinji, M. N. H. *The Image of Modern Man in T.S Eliot's Poetry*. Bloomington: Author House, 2012.
- Barzinji, M. N. H. "Modernism, Modernity and Modernisation." *Modernism and Modernity*, Vol. 3, No. 12, 2013.
- Barzinji, M. N. H. *Modernism: A Critical Introduction*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2015.
- Barzinji, M. N. H. "The Rise of Modernism: A New History of Western Modernism." *Journal of Kirkuk University Humanity Studies* Vol. 11, No. 1, 2016, pp. 1-42.
- Barzinji, M. N. H. and Berzenji L. S. N. *T.S Eliot: Critical Essays*. Bloomington: Author House, 2017.
- Batra, Sh. *T.S Eliot A Critical Study of His Poetry*. London: IVY Publishing House, 2001.
- Bhattacharya, Purbita. "'The Hollow Men': A Spiritual Sterility and Journey towards Nothingness." *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2015, pp. 207-209.
- Chatterjee, K. "T. S. Eliot: an introduction." in *Twentieth century poetry and fiction*, Patiala: Punjabi University. 2017.
- Toroczkaï C. I. and Preda D. "Religion and Literature Case Study Mythanalysis." *European Journal of Science and Theology*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2014, pp. 125-132.
- F, Sawyer. "A Reading of T.S.Eliot's Ash-Wednesday." *NT*, 2010, pp. 245-265.





- Ghosh, Indranil. "The Hollow Men: An Inimitable Representation Of Degeneration In Human Civilisation." *International Journal of Innovative Research and Advanced Studies (IJIRAS)*, Vol. 4, No. 6, 2006, pp. 198-200
- Patil, P. M. "General Topics." in *Modern and Post-Modern British Literature*, 2012, pp. 1-9.
- Howarth, Peter. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernist Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Jaleel, J. A. "Intertextuality and Multiculturalism Appealed to Plagiarism in Selected Works of T. S. Eliot." *English Studies International Research Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2016, 129-131.
- Krasner, D. *A History of Modern Drama*. Vol. 1, Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2011.
- Mahdi, A. A. *Tradition in T.S Eliot's The Hollow Men*. (Thesis), University of Kufa, 2017.
- Miola, Robert S. "Seven Types of Intertextuality." in *Shakespeare Italy, and Intertextuality*, Michele Marrapodi (Ed.), Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014, pp. 13-25.
- Mihsin, H. J. "Allusion in T. S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men.'" *Babl University Journal, Human Science*, Vol. 22, No. 6, 2014, pp. 373-384.
- Manschreck, C. L. "Nihilism in the Twentieth Century: A View from Here." *American Society of Church History*, Vol. 45, No. 1, 1976, pp. 85-96.
- Nair, R. N. "Modern Poetry: The First Phase, an Overview." *Epitome Journals*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 2015, pp. 1-16.
- Nasi, Manjola. "The Mythic Method and Intertextuality in T.S Eliot's Poetry." *European Scientific Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 6, 2012, pp. 1-8.
- Ollila, B. and Jantas, J. *The Definition of Poetry*. New York: Teaching Matters Inc., 2006.
- Ogunpitan, S. A. "Art Versus Racism: T. S Eliot's the Hollow Men and Black Identity." *International Journal of Linguistics and Education*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 3 May 2017, pp. 41-49. Doi:10.11648/j.ijle.20170202.13.



- Stolarek, J. "Quest for values in T. S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' and 'Ash Wednesday'". *The Academic Quarterly FIDES ET RATIO*, Vol. 17, 2014, pp. 234-243.
- Sangi, M. Kh., Soomro, A. F. and Gopang, A. S. "T. S. Eliot's Indigenous Critical Concepts and 'The Hollow Men.'" *Language in India*, Vol. 12, No, 4, 2012, pp. 482-492.
- Subhan , A. *Challenging The Faith: T.S Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' and the Abolition of Religion*. (Thesis), Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, 2014.
- Singh, R. "A Study of Dilemma in The Hollow Men of T.S. Eliot." *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 3 , May 2013, pp. 1-11.
- Shenouda, P. *The Life of Repentance and Purity*. Guirgis, N. (Trans.), Sydney: Coptic Orthodox Publication and Translation, 1990.
- Sarin, L. *Full Circle: T. S. Eliot's Quest for Spiritual Fulfillment*. (Thesis), Eastern Michigan University, 2008.
- Trotter, D. *The Cambridge Companion To Modernism*. Michael Levenson (Ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Vianu, Lidia. *T.S Eliot- An Author for All Seasons*. Bucharest: Editura Universității București, 2002.
- Warren, A. "Eliot's Literary Criticism." *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 1966, 272-292.

پیشگاه علوم انسانی و مطالعات فرهنگی  
پرتال جامع علوم انسانی