T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” Essay, Research Paper

T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri of New England

descent, on Sept. 26, 1888. He entered Harvard University in 1906, completed

his courses in three years and earned a master’s degree the next year. After a

year at the Sorbonne in Paris, he returned to Harvard. Further study led him to

Merton College, Oxford, and he decided to stay in England. He worked first as a

teacher and then in Lloyd’s Bank until 1925. Then he joined the London

publishing firm of Faber and Gwyer, becoming director when the firm became Faber

and Faber in 1929. Eliot won the Nobel prize for literature in 1948 and other

major literary awards.

Eliot saw an exhausted poetic mode being employed, that contained no

verbal excitement or original craftsmanship, by the Georgian poets who were

active when he settled in London. He sought to make poetry more subtle, more

suggestive, and at the same time more precise. He learned the necessity of

clear and precise images, and he learned too, to fear romantic softness and to

regard the poetic medium rather than the poet’s personality as the important

factor. Eliot saw in the French symbolists how image could be both absolutely

precise in what it referred to physically and at the same time endlessly

suggestive in the meanings it set up because of its relationship to other images.

Eliot’s real novelty was his deliberate elimination of all merely connective

and transitional passages, his building up of the total pattern of meaning

through the immediate comparison of images without overt explanation of what

they are doing, together with his use of indirect references to other works of

literature (some at times quite obscure).

Eliot starts his poem “The Hollow Men” with a quote from Joseph Conrad’s

novel the Heart of Darkness. The line “Mistah Kurtz-he dead” refers to a Mr.

Kurtz who was a European trader who had gone in the “the heart of darkness” by

traveling into the central African jungle, with European standards of life and

conduct. Because he has no moral or spiritual strength to sustain him, he was

soon turned into a barbarian. He differs, however, from Eliot’s “hollow men” as

he is not paralyzed as they are , but on his death catches a glimpse of the

nature of his actions when he claims “The horror! the Horror!” Kurtz is thus

one of the “lost /Violent souls” mentioned in lines 15-16. Eliot next continues

with “A penny for the Old Guy”. This is a reference to the cry of English

children soliciting money for fireworks to commemorate Guy Fawkes day, November

5; which commemorates the “gunpowder plot” of 1605 in which Guy Fawkes and other

conspirators planned to blow up both houses of Parliament. On this day, which

commemorates the failure of the explosion, the likes of Fawkes are burned in

effigy and mock explosions using fireworks are produced. The relation of this

custom to the poem suggests another inference: as the children make a game of

make believe out of Guy Fawkes , so do we make a game out of religion.

The first lines bring the title and theme into a critical relationship.

We are like the “Old Guy”, effigies stuffed with straw. It may also be noticed

that the first and last part of the poem indicate a church service, and the

ritual service throughout. This is indicated in the passages “Leaning

together…whisper together”, and the voices “quiet and meaningless” as the

service drones on. The erstwhile worshippers disappear in a blur of shape,

shade gesture, to which normality is attached. Then the crucial orientation is

developed, towards “death’s other Kingdom.” We know that we are in the Kingdom

of death, not as “violent souls” but as empty effigies, “filled with straw”, of

this religious service.

Part two defines the hollow men in relation to the reality with those

“direct eyes have met”. “Direct eyes” symbolizing those who represent something

positive (direct). Fortunately, the eyes he dare not meet even in dreams do not

appear in “death’s dream kingdom.” They are only reflected through broken light

and shadows, all is perceived indirectly. He would not be any nearer , any more

direct, in this twilight kingdom. He fears the ultimate vision.

Part three defines the representation of death’s kingdom in relationship

to the worship of the hollow men. A dead, arid land, like it’s people, it

raises stone images of the spiritual, which are implored by the dead. And again

the “fading star” establishes a sense of remoteness from reality. The image of

frustrated love which follows is a moment of anguished illumination suspended

between the two kingdoms of death. Lips that would adore, pray instead to a

broken image. The “broken stone” unites the “stone images” and the broken

column,” which bent the sunlight.

Part four explores this impulse in relation to the land, which now

darkens progressively as the valley of the shadow of death. Now there are not

even hints of the eyes (of the positive), and the “fading” becomes the “dying”

star. In action the hollow men now “grope together / And avoid speech”,

gathered on the banks of the swollen river which must be crossed to get to

“death’s other kingdom”. The contrast with part I is clear. Without any eyes

at all they are without any vision, unless “the eyes” return as the “perpetual”,

not a fading or dying star. But for empty men this is only a hope. As the

star becomes a rose, so the rose becomes the rose windows of the church; the

rose as an image of the church and multifoliate. Which is a reference to

Dante’s Divine Comedy, where the multifoliate rose is a symbol of paradise, in

which the saints are the petals of the rose.

But Part Five develops the reality, not the hope of the empty men; the

cactus not the rose. The nursery level make believe mocks the hope of empty men.

In desire they “go round the prickly pear” but are frustrated by the prickles.

The poem now develops the frustration of impulse. At various levels, and in

various aspects of life, there falls the frustrating shadow of fear, the

essential shadow of this land. Yet the shadow is more than fear: it

concentrates the valley of shadow into a shape of horror, almost a

personification of its negative character. The passage from the Lord’s Prayer

relates the Shadow to religion, with irony in the attribution. Next the

response about the length of life relates it to the burden of life. Lastly the

Lord’s Prayer again relates the Shadow to the Kingdom that is so hard. This

repetition follows the conflict of the series that produces life itself,

frustrating the essence from descent to being. This is the essential irony of

their impaired lives. The end comes by way of ironic completion as the nursery

rhyme again takes up its repetitive round, and terminates with the line that

characterizes the evasive excuse. They are the whimpers of fear with which the

hollow men end, neither the bang of Guy Fawkes day nor the “lost violent soul.”

In part Five the frustration of reality is described by the abstractions

introduced in Part I; life is frustrated at every level, and this accounts for

the nature of the land and the character of its people. By placing G-d in a

casual relation to this condition, the poem develops an irony which results in

the “whimper”. But the most devastating irony is formal: the extension of game

ritual in liturgical form.