

Line by line analysis of the poem The Hollow Men by T. S. Eliot

First Epigraph

Mistah Kurtz-he dead.

The first epigraph is a quote from a servant in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

The servant reveals to the character Marlow that another character named Kurtz has just died.

Conrad's novel is a true classic, but we don't think you need to rush out to read it to understand this poem.

Here's the lowdown: Kurtz is an British ivory trader in Africa, and is one of the many Europeans who arrived to exploit that continent's resources in the 19th and early 20th centuries. He seems to have some qualities of greatness because he collects more ivory than other traders, but in one memorable passage, Marlow suspects Kurtz of being "hollow to the core" and lacking a human and moral nature. (Read more.) The epigraph tells us that, in some sense, the poem is set after the death of Kurtz, or someone "hollow" man like him.

Second Epigraph

A penny for the Old Guy

The English celebrate Guy Fawkes Day every November 5th with fireworks and the burning of little straw men or "effigies."

Guy Fawkes was convicted of trying to blow up King James I in 1605 by stashing gunpowder underneath the Parliament building. The incident is known as the "Gunpowder Plot." But Fawkes and the gunpowder were discovered before the plan went off, and Fawkes gave up the names of his co-conspirators under torture.

To celebrate Guy Fawkes Day, English children ask for money to fund the explosions of their straw effigies of Fawkes, so they say, "A penny for the guy?" "Guy" being his first name. You can read more about it [here](#).

But there's more. According to Ancient Greek mythology, a person who died would need to pay Charon, the ferryman, with a coin before he would take you across the River Styx into the realm of death. So the "Old Guy" also refers to the ancient figure of Charon. Apparently, someone is begging for a "penny" to give the ferryman to get across the Styx.

Lines 1-4

We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

Hold hands everyone, we're going to sing a song: "We are the hol-low men! We are the stuffed men!"

Well, maybe these lines don't work as a Broadway showstopper, but it is striking that the Hollow Men are singing in chorus, as a group.

At this point, we have no idea where they are.

They are both "hollow" and "stuffed." Aren't these qualities the opposite of one another?

Not if hollow means something like "lacking a heart," or in the Scarecrow's famous words from The Wizard of Oz: "If I only had a brain!"

The Hollow Men are lacking something essential.

They are also "stuffed" with straw, like an effigy of Guy Fawkes (see "Second Epigraph") or like a scarecrow.

They are leaning together to support each other, as if they are frightened or cannot support themselves.

We think of a bundle of sticks being stacked together to form a lean-to.

They are not happy about their "hollow" condition, either, but they can only express their unhappiness in the one-word exclamation, "Alas!"

This is a cheesy thing to say, and Eliot knows it. We shouldn't expect people whose heads are filled with straw to express themselves profoundly.

Lines 5-10

Our dried voices, when

We whisper together

Are quiet and meaningless

As wind in dry grass

Or rats' feet over broken glass

In our dry cellar

The Hollow Men talk without saying anything meaningful.

They speak in a soft “whisper,” as if they are afraid that someone will hear them.

In an especially haunting image, their voices are compared to the wind running through dry grass, which sounds like a quiet rattling or scraping.

Or, as a second example, the voices sound like the feet of rats pitter-pattering over pieces of broken glass “In our dry cellar.”

If both these images make you shiver, you’re on the right track. (If you’ve seen the Lord of the Rings series, does this remind you of Gollum at all?)

At least we have learned about what the Hollow Men were like on earth. They had a “cellar” like many average people.

The first stanza uses “dry” or “dried” three times. Eliot wants you to know: the Hollow Men are dry and do not have blood in the veins. They don’t even have veins.

To make another comparison with the movies, remember how the renegade pirates in The Pirates of the Caribbean were cursed with being unable to eat or drink anything, and so their skin got dry and they began to fall apart? The Hollow Men have a similar curse. They are filled with straw, which is a kind of “dry grass.”

Lines 11-12

Shape without form, shade without colour,

Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

The speaker removes himself from the narration to give four examples of other things that have “missing essentials.”

Just like the Hollow Men, these things only half-exist, because they are missing something else that will make them real.

The first example is “shape without form.”

A shape becomes a form when it has substance. Otherwise it’s just an empty idea, like the difference between the ball you imagine in your head (a shape) and a ball of dough (a form).

In the same line of thought, you can’t have a “shade” without “color,” because “shade” is a degree of color. But somehow, the Hollow Men have one without the other. (Also, Eliot is making a pun on the word “shade,” which can mean “ghost”).

“Force” is the power to act or move, but “Paralysed force” is a force that can’t move or act.

All of these examples are contradictory: they would make no sense in the real world.

The final example is “gesture without motion.” Can you make a gesture without moving?

Here’s an exercise: try making the universal gesture for “STOP!” without moving a muscle. Can you do it? Not unless you lived in some strange netherworld, which seems to be what we’re dealing with in this poem.

Lines 13-18

Those who have crossed

With direct eyes, to death’s other Kingdom

Remember us-if at all-not as lost

Violent souls, but only

As the hollow men

The stuffed men.

You could read these lines in two ways: 1) the Hollow Men are asking people who have crossed into “death’s other Kingdom” to remember them as stuffed and empty men and not as violent and nasty people; or 2) the Hollow Men are stating as a fact that this is how they have been remembered.

The difference is between “They remember me like this . . .” and “Remember me like this!”

The word “crossed” might remind us of the “Second Epigraph,” and the Greek myth where dead souls must pay Charon to cross the River Styx to enter the realm of the dead.

For some reason, the Hollow Men never made it to the land of the dead. They are stuck in no-man’s land.

From a Christian perspective, “death’s other Kingdom” sounds like Heaven, where souls look with “direct eyes” at God.

The Hollow Men do not have “direct eyes.” Do they even have eyes at all?

Beware: we’re about to throw more allusions at you.

In particular, this whole poem seems to be inspired by the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, the great Italian poet. Eliot was obsessed with Dante. Seriously obsessed. He borrowed so much from Dante that he should have to pay royalties.

We think the idea for “The Hollow Men” comes from Canto 3 of Dante’s Inferno. In that canto, Dante arrives at the gates of Hell and sees a group of people wandering around aimlessly and

miserably, with lots of tears and wailing. As Dante's guide Virgil says, "They have no hope of death, and their blind life is so abject that they are envious of every other lot. The world does not permit report of them. Mercy and justice hold them in contempt. Let us not speak of them – look and pass by."

To recap: the souls in Canto 3 of Dante's *Inferno* can't even die, they are "blind," and the world will not "report of" or remember them.

This sounds kind of like our *Hollow Men*, doesn't it?

As Virgil explains elsewhere in the canto, these souls did not take sides in the universal conflict between good and evil. They thought they lived their lives apart from difficult moral questions. In a sense, both Dante and Eliot believed that such people are the worst of all, because they are too timid or indifferent even to do bad things.

As for "direct eyes," in the other two parts of the *Divine Comedy*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, Dante constantly describes the eyes of his great love, the heavenly Beatrice. She has the kind of eyes that can see right through a person's flaws and mistakes. Dante can't hide anything from her powerful vision. As a heavenly soul, she is also able to look "directly" at God.

Lines 19-28

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams

In death's dream kingdom

These do not appear:

There, the eyes are

Sunlight on a broken column

There, is a tree swinging

And voices are

In the wind's singing

More distant and more solemn

Than a fading star.

We're starting to get it: the *Hollow Men* do not want to look anyone in the eyes. They are timid and frightened.

They worry that the eyes of souls from Heaven ("death's dream kingdom") will enter into their dreams and try to make eye contact.

The speaker talks about a place out “there” where the eyes shine like “sunlight on a broken column” and distant voices are carried by the wind, which also makes a tree sway.

“There” could be either in their dreams or in “death’s dream kingdom.”

(The poem’s imagery is vague and inconclusive, so don’t worry if you can’t piece together every last thing.)

We think of the eyes as revealing truth, and the Hollow Men are afraid to have the truth of their condition revealed.

They are too ashamed to confront the reality of what they have become. They live in a fragmented world of “broken” and “fading” objects.

Lines 29-38

Let me be no nearer

In death’s dream kingdom

Let me also wear

Such deliberate disguises

Rat’s coat, crowskin, crossed staves

In a field

Behaving as the wind behaves

No nearer-

Not that final meeting

In the twilight kingdom

Too bad you can’t convey a pirate voice in writing, otherwise we’d paraphrase their attitude as, “Stay back, ye heavenly vermin!”

The Hollow Men do not want to go anywhere near “death’s dream kingdom,” for fear of those truth-revealing eyes.

The big hint is “crossed staves,” which means two wooden poles. They explain their appearance as an effort not to get recognized by those probing eyes.

Just like scarecrows that “behave as the wind behaves” – twisting and turning without direction.

The mediocre souls in Canto 3 of Dante's *Inferno* also run around with no purpose, another sign that Eliot was inspired by that text.

At the end of the section, the souls vow not to have a "final meeting" at "twilight." This meeting could refer to the Last Judgment in Christian theology and "twilight" could refer to the end of the world.

The Hollow Men are afraid of the judgment they'll receive when their character is finally examined by the "eyes." They can only delay justice, not escape it.

(If you wanted to, you could also compare images of light and darkness between this poem and *Heart of Darkness*.)

Lines 39-44

This is the dead land

This is cactus land

Here the stone images

Are raised, here they receive

The supplication of a dead man's hand

Under the twinkle of a fading star.

The Hollow Men live in a region that looks like desert where nothing lives but cacti that can survive without much water.

The Hollow Men pray to "stone images," which are like false gods or idols. The "dead man" is one of the Hollow Men. They are dead in the sense that they do not have life, but they also cannot cross over into the kingdom of death.

It's like being trapped at a rest stop on the highway between two destinations.

To "supplicate" is to beg or ask for something, so the Hollow Men are begging the stones to help them out of their mess.

The star might represent hope or salvation, as stars are usually associated with Heaven. But their hopes are fading fast, and only a small "twinkle" of light remains.

Lines 45-51

Is it like this

In death's other kingdom

Waking alone

At the hour when we are

Trembling with tenderness

Lips that would kiss

Form prayers to broken stone.

All of a sudden the Hollow Men are curious about “death’s other Kingdom.”

They don’t really suspect that things are better in Heaven or anywhere else. Otherwise, they probably would have tried to get there.

They want to know if people in the other kingdom also wake up alone, with warm and tender feelings but no outlet for them except to pray to a bunch of “broken stone” images.

If you have read Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, you might notice that these lines reverse Juliet’s claim that saints must use their lips for prayer rather than kissing. The Hollow Men pray, but their prayers are blasphemous and corrupted:

ROMEO

Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIET

Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

Lines 52-56

The eyes are not here

There are no eyes here

In this valley of dying stars

In this hollow valley

This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

The Hollow Men are still worried about those eyes. The eyes from heaven are not present, but the lines also suggest that the Hollow Men have no vision.

There is another way to interpret this line. “Eyes” sounds like “Is”, as in, “The Is are not here.” There are no independent personalities or selves among the group.

Hope continues to fade, as the stars fade or “die” away.

The “valley” leads us to think of one a famous Psalm from the Bible, that goes, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23).

They are in a valley of death, but there is no one there to comfort them because they never joined with God.

The Hollow Men each used to have their own kingdoms – literally or metaphorically – but these kingdoms have been lost or broken like a jaw. Why a jaw?

We’re not sure – maybe you can tell us!

At any rate, here the only true kingdom is the Kingdom of God, and they had their chance to join it but did not.

Lines 57-60

In this last of meeting places

We grope together

And avoid speech

Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

We finally learn where the Hollow Men are gathered: on the banks of a swollen or “tumid” river.

They are huddled together as if they were going to be washed away. The river is practically overflowing with water, in contrast to the dryness of the men and the desert around them.

This is the last place that they will meet before they face some more terrible fate.

The river most likely represents Acheron, branch of the mythical River Styx in Greece that souls must cross into death.

To make the trip, you would have to pay Charon, the ferryman, a coin to take you on his boat.

Unfortunately, no one has arrived to take these souls across. They are stranded.

There's nothing left to say about their dire situation, so they "avoid speech."

In Canto 3 of Dante's *Inferno*, Dante asks his guide Virgil why souls are so eager to get across Acheron, and Virgil responds that God's justice "spurs them on" so that they actually want to get to Hell sooner.

But the Hollow Men can't even get to Hell.

Lines 61-67

Sightless, unless

The eyes reappear

As the perpetual star

Multifoliate rose

Of death's twilight kingdom

The hope only

Of empty men.

The Hollow Men are "sightless," like a bunch of underground worms, but if the "eyes" return their vision could be restored.

Their only hope is if the heavenly eyes come back as a star.

This star would be "perpetual" or eternal, unlike the "fading" or "dying" stars in the desert. By now you've probably noticed that Eliot is throwing around symbols like candy at a Fourth of July parade.

A "multifoliate" rose has many petals. Here again Eliot is referring to – guess who? – Dante Alighieri.

In Dante's *Paradiso*, the final vision of paradise is of a flower made up of saints, angels, and other examples of goodness and virtue. The community of Heaven is like a rose with petals made of people. Dante also compares Mary, the mother of Jesus, to a rose.

The point of these lines is that the Hollow Men cannot save themselves. They have no hope except for the Heavenly souls to come down and restore their vision of truth and goodness.

Lines 68-71

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.

Admit it: if you had to blindly wait on the banks of a river until the end of time, you might join hands and start singing "Here we go 'round the mulberry bush," too.

And if you didn't have a mulberry bush, well, then you'd just have to sing about the "prickly pear" cactus.

"Here we go 'round the mulberry bush" is a children's song about people dancing around the bush "so early in the morning."

Eliot actually gives the time at which they are dancing: 5 o'clock in the morning.

According to one commentary on the poem, "5:00 a.m. is the traditional time of Christ's resurrection" (source).

The resurrection is the most important moment in the Christ story, but here the Hollow Men are performing a children's dance around a cactus, totally unaware of the significance of the time.

Lines 72-76

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the Shadow

If you look back to lines 12-13, you'll remember the list of "missing essentials," or things that are lacking some essential component, like "gesture without motion."

In this final section of the poem, Eliot presents a similar idea.

For the Hollow Men, some mysterious "shadow" has fallen between some potential for action and the action itself to prevent them from doing anything.

They have "ideas" but cannot bring them into "reality."

They can "move" but not coordinate their movements into "action."

The “shadow” falls like an iron curtain to block their intentions.

Line 77

For Thine is the Kingdom

The Hollow Men begin to say part of a prayer but do not finish it. “For Thine is the Kingdom” is part of the ending to the Lord’s Prayer that goes: “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.”

You get the feeling that if the Hollow Men could just get to the end of the prayer, maybe they would be saved.

You’ll notice that the word “kingdom” has been used a lot in this poem. God has his everlasting kingdom in Heaven, and the Hollow Men had their “lost kingdoms.”

Lines 78-83

Between the conception

And the creation

Between the emotion

And the response

Falls the Shadow

Life is very long

Here comes that Shadow again. “Conception” is the moment of pregnancy or the beginning of idea, but “creation” is when that being comes into existence.

An “emotion” is a mental state, but a response is an action resulting from that state.

The shadow prevents one thing from leading naturally to the other.

If you went to the doctor and he or she tapped your knee with that little rubber hammer, and you had no physical response, it would be a problem.

The stanza ends with the beginning of another statement: “Life is very long.”

You can almost hear the Hollow Men sighing wearily as they say that, as if they are bored and worn down.

Compared to eternity, of course, life is pretty short.

Lines 84-91

Between the desire

And the spasm

Between the potency

And the existence

Between the essence

And the descent

Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

The poem gives three more examples of the Shadow's dirty work. It prevents "desire" from becoming the "spasm" of sexual satisfaction – that is, orgasm.

It also comes between potential or "potency" and existence, and between the higher "essence" of things and the "descent" of this essence into our physical world.

In case Eliot is getting too philosophical, here's a simpler way of putting it: the Shadow prevents things that should naturally follow from one another from happening.

The stanza ends, again, with a fragment of the Lord's Prayer. They still can't say any more than this one part of the prayer.

Lines 92-94

For Thine is

Life is

For Thine is the

The Hollow Men repeat the fragmented lines from the end of the last three stanzas, but this time chopped down even further.

They just trail off, as if they can't remember how the rest goes or have slipped into some semi-conscious state.

Cut them some slack, though: their heads are filled with straw.

Lines 95-98

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper.

They pick up again with another crazy adaptation of the “Mulberry Bush” song. The song provides little lessons about how to do chores around the house, like “This is the way we wash our clothes” and “This is the way we sweep the floor.” (Read the full song.)

(Wow, that song is totally just a way to trick kids into doing work!)

In Eliot’s version, the Hollow Men are singing about how the world ends as they dance around the prickly pear.

These lines are the most famous and frequently repeated lines in the poem.

The world ends not with a “bang” like you might expect, with some huge war between angels and demons, but with a “whimper,” like a defeated puppy.

The question is, does the world end this way for everyone, or just for the Hollow Men? Keep in mind that they are the ones singing.

The end of the world is, in a word, anticlimactic.