The Hollow Men

SUMMARY

1.

The speaker declares that he is part of a group of empty people. These people are stuffed, perhaps like scarecrows, and lean against each other with their heads full of straw. "Oh well," the speaker says. Their voices are so dried-out that they can barely be heard when they whisper to each other, and what they say is as meaningless as the rustling of wind in dead grass, or the skittering of rats over shattered glass in a dry cellar.

These men are bodies without definition, shadows without color, frozen strength, action without movement.

Those who've crossed over to the other kingdom of the dead, looking straight ahead the whole time, don't remember these hollow men as lost, angry spirits (if they remember them at all), but rather as empty people, as people stuffed, metaphorically, with straw.

2.

The speaker sees eyes in his dreams but refuses to look back at them. In death's dream kingdom (perhaps a reference to Heaven), these eyes don't appear. There (likely in the speaker's dream, though what "there" refers to is deliberately ambiguous), the eyes the speaker sees are like sunshine on a broken column. There, a tree is waving in the breeze and you can hear voices singing in the wind. Those voices are farther away and more somber than a dying star.

The speaker doesn't want to get any closer (perhaps to those eyes) in death's dream kingdom. He also wants to wear elaborate disguises to conceal himself: the skin of a rat or a crow, sticks crossed in a field, twisting and turning like the wind. The speaker doesn't don't want to be any closer—not even when having that final meeting in the shadowy world of death.

3.

This is the dead country, the speaker says, a land filled with cactus. Here, stone statues are erected and the dead bow down before them, under the light of a dying star.

Is it like this in the other places where death is king, the speaker wonders (likely referencing to Heaven and/or Hell)? When the hollow men are walking alone and filled with love, instead of kissing someone they say prayers to the broken stone statues.

4.

The eyes aren't here: there aren't any eyes here, in this place where the stars die, in this empty valley, this broken jawbone, which once belonged to the body of a magnificent kingdom.

This is the final meeting place. The hollow men walk blindly, silently, together; they gather on the shore of a swollen river.

The hollow men are blind, unless their eyesight suddenly returns—like an undying star, like a rose with many leaves, a rose that belongs to death's shadowy kingdom. That rose is the only hope for empty people like the hollow men.

5.

The hollow men are dancing around the cactus—a word the speaker repeats three times. Here they are dancing around the cactus at 5 a.m., the speaker says again.

The speaker says that between an idea and its actual existence, between the desire and the fulfillment of that desire, there is a shadow. Because the kingdom belongs to You, the speaker—or, more likely, some new, unnamed entity—says, quoting the Bible.

Between having an idea and making it real, between having a feeling and acting on it, there is a shadow. Life is very long, says the speaker or that same unnamed entity.

Between desire and orgasm, between the power to create something and the thing that gets created, between the ideal and the disappointing reality, there is a shadow. Because the kingdom belongs to you, says a voice that may or may not be the speaker's once again.

The speaker begins to repeats that phrase but stumbles:
"Because yours is
Life is
Because yours is the..." and then the speaker trails off.

This is how the world ends, the speaker says three times in a row. Not with a loud burst but with a quiet whimper.

THEMES

EMPTINESS AND CULTURAL DECAY

In the opening line of "The Hollow Men," the speaker makes a strange and unsettling announcement: he's part of a group of "hollow" people. Moreover, he lives in a landscape which is itself "hollow." As the poem proceeds, however, it becomes clear that the speaker's hollowness is not strictly literal. Instead, it serves as an extended metaphor for the decay of European society and culture.

The speaker describes himself—and his fellow "hollow men"—as inhuman, dangerous, and incapable of taking real action. For instance, in the first part of the poem, the speaker characterizes the hollow men's "voices" as "dried." Instead of sounding like normal human voices, full of emotion and information, they are "quiet and meaningless / As wind in dry grass." In other words, their voices no longer sound like human voices—and their voices no longer carry information or emotion, like human voices are supposed to do. Instead, their voices have become as

random and senseless as the wind itself. The "hollow men" are more than simply empty in the sense of being sad or despairing—rather, they've lost their humanity.

And in the process, they've become a danger to human societies. In section two, the speaker describes himself wearing a "rat's coat" and "crowskin." These are symbols of disease and death, respectively, and they suggest that the "hollow men" are dangerous to be around. This is not because they're necessarily bad or malicious; if they do damage to other people, it's because they happen to be contagious. Their despair is like a plague that passes from person to person.

Indeed, the "hollow men" seem incapable of actually *doing* much of anything—much less being intentionally destructive. In section three, the speaker notes that they "would kiss" each other, but they can't. Instead, they "form prayers to broken stone"—which implies that they are worshipping false idols. (For more about that, see the "Faith and Faithlessness" theme). And the "hollow men" can't bring themselves to come into contact with each other or with other people; they aren't able to act on their desires or impulses.

However ineffective the "hollow men" are, however unable to act on their impulses, they nonetheless have a strong effect on the world around them. Indeed, the environment in which they live seems to have taken on their characteristics. For instance, the speaker describes the landscape as a "hollow valley" and as a desert, with only prickly cactuses for vegetation; the wind whistles mournfully through it. The landscape is just as hollow as they are.

Yet while the "hollow men" are a danger to human communities, the landscape itself is an image of a damaged culture. In lines 22-23, the speaker says that in the desolate landscape where he lives "the eyes"—a symbol for God's judgement—are like "sunlight on a broken column." The column serves here as a symbol of Western Civilization and Western Culture: columns are one of the defining architectural features of ancient Greek and Roman temples. For such a symbol to be broken suggests that the landscape the speaker describes is more broadly symbolic of Western Civilization in decline.

This serves as a helpful hint for how to understand the poem as a whole. Instead of being a piece of science fiction about a group of hollow people, it is a reflection on the state of European culture at the time of Eliot's writing, right after World War I—a devastating war that shook many people's faith in European culture and left behind a shattered generation of soldiers who survived. The poem's judgment of European culture after World War I is very negative: the culture itself is in decline and the people who could preserve it are empty, ineffectual, and even dangerous to their own societies.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-18
- Between Lines 18-19
- Lines 19-38
- Between Lines 38-39
- Lines 39-51
- Between Lines 51-52
- Lines 52-67
- Between Lines 67-68
- Lines 68-98

FAITH AND FAITHLESSNESS

On its surface, "The Hollow Men" is not a religious poem. Throughout, however, the speaker makes a series of subtle religious references and allusions. These references suggest that the "hollow men" have lost their connection to God. The speaker thus suggests that they might be restored—become fully human again—if they could regain their faith. At the same time, he also suggests that such renewed faith is impossible for the "hollow men."

The speaker of "The Hollow Men" regularly suggests that he and his companions have lost contact with God. For instance, in lines 41-43, the speaker describes the "hollow men" praying to "stone images." This alludes to passages in the Bible where the Israelites stop worshipping God and instead start following false gods, which are often represented by "graven images." When that happens in the Bible, God punishes the Israelites for failing to worship him properly. The allusion suggests that the "hollow men" are like the backsliding Israelites: they too have strayed from their religious commitments and fallen into idolatry.

Similarly, the speaker describes the "hollow men" as blind, "sightless" in line 61. Their only hope for regaining their sight is a "multifoliate rose." The "rose" is a traditional symbol of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism. The speaker thus suggests that the "hollow men" need the Virgin Mary's help to regain their sight.

These religious references reach their peak in the fifth section of the poem. In this section the poem quotes directly from the Book of Matthew: "Thine is the kingdom." This is an allusion to a longer passage in which Christ says, "Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever, Amen." Here Christ means that God is ruler of the Universe and always will be. However, the speaker doesn't quote this passage from the Bible: instead it appears indented, in italics. This indicates that it is in a different voice: in other words, it's not the "hollow men" speaking but someone else, who enters the poem briefly.

The other voice is connected with God: whoever the voice is, he or she knows the Bible and is capable of quoting from it. The speaker, by contrast, can't do that—when he tries, he ends up butchering the passage. "Thine is," he says and then trails off;

"Thine is the." Something is blocking the speaker. This, in turn, seems to be the "shadow" that the speaker describes repeatedly in section five. The shadow is symbolic of anxiety, fear, and death. The "shadow" is powerful: it intervenes in some of the basic forces necessary for the universe to work (forces like desire and emotion) and prevents them from functioning properly. The shadow separates the "the idea" from "the reality," "the motion" from "the act," "the conception" from "the creation." Essentially, it is severing cause from effect, or action from meaning.

To the speaker, the "shadow" seems unbeatable: he ends the poem imagining the world ending, simply puttering out: "not with a bang but a whimper." As the shadow cuts off cause from effect, the world slowly runs down, unable to sustain itself. However, the allusion to the Bible earlier in the poem reminds the reader that—from a religious point of view—God *should* or at least *could* set it all right. The resources are there to restore the "hollow men"—and the culture they represent—to a full, healthy relationship with God. That they cannot regain this relationship suggests that such intimacy with God is permanently lost, at least in the world of this poem. Though the speaker longs nostalgically for a lost religious faith, he has given up trying to get it back.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

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LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1

Mistah Kurtz-he dead ...
... the Old Guy

"The Hollow Men" begins with two epigraphs: quotes from (or allusions to) other texts that Eliot uses to guide his reader into the complicated and strange world of his poem.

The first quote, "Mistah Kurtz-he dead," comes from Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. The novel is, in part, the story of Captain Kurtz—an ivory trader in colonial Africa who is held up as an example of European enlightenment but who loses his mind and goes to live in the bush and sets himself up as a god-like figure ruling over a group of natives. The quote thus suggests some of the concerns of Eliot's poem: the poem is about the decline of European culture after World War I. Although *Heart of Darkness* was published before World War I, it anticipates Eliot's feeling that European civilization was coming apart, and that its ideals were hollow at the core. Captain Kurtz represents Eliot's greatest fear for his society: that it will turn its back on its own historical accomplishments and end up like Kurtz, "dead," alone, empty.

The second epigraph is a traditional saying. It comes from Guy Fawkes Day, which is celebrated in England on November 5th. Fawkes, a Catholic revolutionary, was arrested on November 5th, 1605 for plotting to blow up Parliament. To mark the occasion children would make effigies of Fawkes out of straw, sticks, and old clothes; they would then be burned on the night of the 5th. Children would go around asking strangers for "a penny for the Old Guy"—in other words, money to help them buy the supplies to construct their effigies. The speaker refers to Fawkes several times over the course of the poem; the effigies of him become an image of the "hollow men" themselves—fake, inhuman, destined for the fire.

LINES 1-4

We are the ...
... with straw. Alas!

The first four lines of "The Hollow Men" establish the poem's form and hint at its larger thematic concerns. The speaker begins with two surprising, even disturbing announcements:

1. He is part of a group of "men," whom he describes as "hollow."
2. Then, a few lines later, he notes that these "hollow men" have heads "stuffed" with "straw."

This seems like a contradiction—until the reader realizes that the "hollow men" aren't literally "hollow." This is a metaphor: it suggests that the speaker and his comrades are empty and lifeless, devoid of joy and vitality. And, similarly, "straw" is a symbol for something worthless, something without value. With their "headpieces filled with straw," then, the "hollow men" have nothing of value in their brains: their thoughts are as empty as their lives.

These lines are written in free verse: they have no regular rhyme scheme or meter. The rest of the poem will also be in free verse. Though some free verse poems establish a strong pattern—even without meter or rhyme—"The Hollow Men" avoids doing so. Instead, the poem jerks around, switching rhythms unpredictably.

The reader gets a sense of that jerkiness in lines 1-4. The first two lines are very repetitive, with parallel sentence structures, anaphoric opening phrases ("We are the …") and diacope at the end of the line with the repeated word "men." The lines are also strongly end-stopped (despite their lack of punctuation!). This all primes the reader for a repetitive poem: a poem that feels

like an incantation or a prayer. But the next two lines have none of the repetitive elements of the previous two lines. What's more they are strongly enjambed.

Just when things seem to be cohering, finding a pattern, the poem shifts. In this sense, it echoes some of the broader themes of the poem: the decay of European culture, its descent into fragments and ruins. These thematic concerns will become more pressing in the next several sections of the poem.

LINES 5-10

Our dried voices, ...
... our dry cellar

The speaker continues to describe the "hollow men," focusing now on their "dried voices." He uses two similes to explain how their voices sound when they "whisper together." First, he says that they sound like "wind in dry grass." In other words, their voices sound like the rustling of dead grass as wind blows through it. Then, the speaker says that their voices sound like "rats' feet over broken glass / in our dry cellar." Their voices sound like rats skittering around in an empty, abandoned cellar.

These two similes are linked together by an assonant /a/ sound, in "grass," "rats," and "glass." This harsh sound echoes the dissonance of the hollow men's voices. And it guides the reader through these two, very different similes. Though they have different terms, they add up to the same thing: the "hollow men" have lost their humanity. And their voices show it: their voices have become "quiet and meaningless." They have lost the intelligence and emotion that usually characterize human voices.

These lines are also more regular than the poem's first four. They are all more or less six syllables of free verse; with the exception of line 10, they are all enjambed. The poem flirts with rhyme here as well: "grass" and "glass" are reasonably good rhymes, while "meaningless" and "grass" are arguable slant rhymes. The speaker seems to hint at an underlying form for the poem, but he is unable to achieve it, to establish a strong, regular formal pattern. The poem thus seems like the "dried voices" of the "hollow men." Like their voices, it fails to be fully meaningful. Though it sometimes seems organized, its unpredictable formal shifts are ultimately reminiscent of the wind rustling in the grass.

LINES 11-12

Shape without form, ...
... gesture without motion;

In lines 11-12, the speaker continues to describe the "hollow men." It's not clear whether he's still talking about their voices or just describing them in general (the poem is purposefully ambiguous in many ways throughout). Either way, the speaker offers a powerful, if complicated account of what the "hollow men" are like.

The lines are broken up into four separate phrases, two per line. Most of the phrases are parallel with each other; each line is split in two by a caesura. The lines thus build on each other. Each phrase adds onto the next, gradually building a powerful portrait of the "hollow men."

Once the reader begins to dig into the lines, that portrait is unsettling. The "hollow men" have "shape" but no "form." In other words, they are lumpy, loose, unformed. They have "shade" but no "colour." They are gray, colorless. Their strength, or "force," is "paralysed." They are powerless; they can't use their own strength. They make "gesture[s]" but without "motion." In other words, their limbs wave about but fail to accomplish anything. In sum, the "hollow men" are pale and powerless, hardly human—just the raw outlines, without any of the substance or structure.

These lines break the formal pattern established in lines 5-10. Those lines were roughly six syllables apiece; they flirted with rhyme. They were highly enjambed. These lines are 9 and 10 syllables, respectively. They have no rhyme at all. They are end-stopped, with strong internal caesuras. Just when the reader was starting to get used to one formal pattern, the speaker switches to something else. The poem consistently keeps the reader from feeling comfortable. As a result it never feels like the poem *has* a pattern: instead, it seems like a set of fragments. And in that way, it echoes the decaying, broken culture it describes.

LINES 13-18

Those who have ...
... The stuffed men.

The speaker continues to describe the "hollow men," but this time he focuses on how other people see them. There are two possible ways to interpret these lines. Either the speaker is *imploring* "those who have crossed ... to death's other Kingdom" to remember the hollow men in a certain way (essentially begging, "Don't remember us as being evil!"), or he is simply relating *how* "those who have crossed" remember the hollow men (basically saying, "They remember us as not being evil.").

Either way, this gives away a key piece of information: the "hollow men" are dead. Perhaps this is meant to be literal—the men are in a sort of purgatory, a space between Heaven and Hell. Just as likely, however, this could be a metaphor: the hollow men are *spiritually* dead, rather than being literally deceased. And they live in one of several of "death's ... Kingdoms." As the poem proceeds, it becomes clear that they are in an underworld of some sort, perhaps Hell or perhaps purgatory—and the "other Kingdom" is thus probably Heaven. In other words, the speaker is imagining how those who went to heaven think about himself and his comrades down in Hell/purgatory.

These other people don't seem to have particularly rich or fond memories of the "hollow men." They aren't remembered as

glamorous, romantic, or even especially bad—not as "lost / Violent souls," but simply as empty and worthless. The speaker closes the stanza and the section by returning to the two lines that open it, repeating them almost exactly. It feels like the speaker is stuck on this idea: he's obsessing over his own hollowness. He can't figure out how to get past that.

It's worth noting one small detail from these lines. The people who go to Heaven have, the speaker notes, "crossed / With direct eyes." This will eventually become an important symbol in the poem. "Eyes" come to be associated with God, and God's power to observe and judge human life. With their "direct eyes," the people going to Heaven are closely linked with that power. They are able to look at things and judge the truth. As the poem progresses, it will become clear that the "hollow men" do not share this power: their eyes have lost this directness, and they turn away from truth and judgment.

These lines remain in free verse, ranging from four syllables in line 18 to 10 in line 14. They flirt with rhyme again, with a strong rhyme between "crossed" and "lost," after the sudden drought of rhyme in lines 11-12. The rhythm of the poem, the way it uses rhyme, the number of lines in each stanza, and the length of the lines themselves continue to shift around unpredictably, amplifying the reader's sense of uneasiness and insecurity—and echoing the condition of the "hollow men."

LINES 19-23

Eyes I dare ...
... a broken column

At the start of the poem's second section, the speaker describes a set of "eyes," saying that he doesn't "dare ... meet," even in dreams. This is an allusion to Dante's *Purgatory* and *Paradise*. In those poems, Dante encounters Beatrice, the woman he loved on Earth. But he can't look her in the eye: he is ashamed by her beauty, purity, and innocence. Through the allusion, then, "eyes" in "The Hollow Men" become a symbol of everything pure, holy, and good: they become a symbol for God—and the way God watches and judges human actions.

Indeed, the speaker continues, "in death's dream kingdom," the "eyes" don't even "appear." In other words, in Hell or the underworld (or purgatory), where the "hollow men" live, the eyes don't even show up—they are somewhere else, somewhere better. The "hollow men" have lost their connection with Beatrice and all that she represents: beauty, the cultural tradition of European poetry (which owes much of its grandeur to Dante), and, most importantly, to God.

But it's not like the "eyes" have disappeared entirely. They're just something different—less powerful, sadder. The speaker describes them as "sunlight on a broken column." The broken column is an important symbol in the poem. Columns were one of the most important architectural features of Ancient Greek and Roman civilization; they are closely linked to the cultural accomplishments of those civilizations. In this sense, they stand as symbols for European culture more generally. And they're "broken." This suggests that European culture itself is falling apart, its glorious past in ruins. The "eyes" here are merely sunlight on the "broken column": they *illuminate* its decay, but they don't *fix* the problem.

These lines continue the formal pattern that began in the first section: they are written in loose free verse. The lines are mostly short and heavily enjambed. Because the poem doesn't use punctuation in a standard way, it can be hard to decide definitively whether a line is enjambed or not—line 19 might be end-stopped or it might not. In other words, it's hard to tell how to divide up the sentences in these lines. It could be, "Eyes I dare not meet in dreams. In death's dream kingdom, these do not appear." Or it could be, "Eyes I dare not meet in dreams in death's dream kingdom. These do not appear..."

This ambiguity is important to the poem. Just as European culture is decaying, falling to ruins, so too the poem's sentences become fragments, impossible to piece together into a steady, convincing whole.

LINES 24-28

There, is a ...
... a fading star.

In lines 24-28, the speaker continues to describe "death's dream kingdom"—in other words, Hell or the underworld. As the speaker describes it, this is an uncanny and sad space: trees "swing" in the wind and the wind itself sounds like "distant and ... solemn" voices. In other words, the wind seems almost human, as though it were trying to say something (this is also a moment of pathetic fallacy).

This stands in contrast to the speaker's simile in lines 7-8: there, the voices of "the hollow men" seemed as "quiet and meaningless" as the wind. Here the wind seems to have the power of a human voice. In other words, things are all mixed up: human voices sound like the wind, quiet and meaningless, while the wind has acquired the texture and timbre of a human voice—albeit, a distant and sad voice. Indeed, the speaker notes that the wind's "singing" is "more distant and solemn / Than a fading star." Throughout the poem, stars serve as symbols of hope: the "fading" star suggests that hope itself is fading.

These lines continue the formal pattern, such as it is, of the previous lines: like them, they are written in loose, highly enjambed free verse. The lines vary in length: they almost seem like the "swinging" of the tree in line 24 as they oscillate between shorter and longer lines. The poem's form consistently registers the damaged, decaying world that the speaker describes.

LINES 29-32

Let me be ...
... Such deliberate disguises

In lines 29-32, the speaker switches things up. He's spent the last eight lines describing "death's dream kingdom." For the rest of the poem's second section, he will describe his relationship to "death's dream kingdom": how he behaves, what he wears.

He starts off by noting that he wants to be "no nearer." This refers back to the "fading star" in line 28. In other words, he wants to be as distant as the "fading star." This is a strange desire. But it shows how sad and diminished the speaker's world really is. The best thing he can imagine for himself is to be a "distant" and "fading" star, a symbol of hope that's losing its luster and power. The speaker's ambitions for his own life are limited and sad.

Then the speaker introduces a new desire: to "wear ... deliberate disguises." He wants to put on a set of costumes. These costumes are carefully designed, "deliberate." Perhaps he wants to hide himself from the judgmental "eyes" up in Heaven. Yet one also has the sense that that don't actually *disguise* the speaker. Instead, they do just the opposite: reveal who he really is.

As the speaker outlines these desires, he continues to write in free-verse. These lines are relatively organized, with a repeated (and anaphoric) phrase at the start of lines 29 and 31, "Let me..." And a pattern of enjambment and end-stop appears, briefly: with lines 29 and 31 both enjambed and lines 30 and 32 both end-stopped. As the speaker articulates these desires, his poem gains a kind of power and organization it has otherwise lacked. But that organization doesn't last for long.

LINES 33-38

Rat's coat, crowskin, ...
... the twilight kingdom

In lines 31-32, the speaker expresses a desire: he wants to "wear ... deliberate disguises." He dedicates the next several lines of the poem to describing those disguises, and how he will behave while wearing them. He has three disguises in mind.

First, he wants to wear a "Rat's coat." In other words, he wants to wear a coat made out of rat fur. This is a gross and disturbing idea—all the more so because rats are a traditional symbol for disease. Next, he says he wants to wear "crowskin"—the feathers of a crow—as a disguise. Crows are a symbol for death. So, it seems the speaker wants to be (or at least present himself as) disease and death. This suggests that the speaker sees himself as a danger to other people: he spreads death and disease. It doesn't seem like the speaker is actively malicious, however; it's not like he really wants to spread plague. Rather, he seems to be recognizing that his own condition as a "hollow man" is *itself* contagious—his despair and disillusionment is spreading through the population.

The alliterative hard /k/ sound in "coat" and "crowskin" links the symbols together, and suggests a causal connection between them: disease leads to death. And it also links up with the next disguise, "crossed staves." As his final disguise, he wants to be "crossed staves / In a field / Behaving as the wind behaves." In England, scarecrows are often made from crossed sticks or staves, dressed in cast-off clothes stuffed with straw. In other words, the speaker is alluding once again to the effigies of Guy Fawkes that children in England made from old clothes and straw. He wants to be as empty, as inhuman, as those effigies.

Indeed, he wants to act like the wind—blowing this way and that with seemingly no purpose. The wind has often served in the poem as a measure of the hollow men's inhumanity, their loss of dignity and human feeling. In asking for this disguise and using a simile to compare himself to the wind, then, the speaker seems to want to wallow, to sink into his despair and occupy it. He wants to be as hollow and depleted as possible.

The section ends with the speaker reiterating his desire from line 29: he wants to be "no nearer." To what? Well, it's a bit ambiguous. Perhaps he is again trying to avoid those judging "eyes" from the previous stanza, and again referencing the "distant ... fading star" of lines 27-28. The star is a symbol of hope, but it's fading, losing its power. The speaker is actively avoiding a more hopeful life. He doesn't want to be "nearer" than the "fading star" because he wants to wallow in his condition as "hollow man"—and because he wants to delay that "final meeting / In the twilight kingdom." This seems like a reference to the final judgment, when God will judge human souls and assign them a permanent place in Heaven or Hell. The speaker wants to avoid judgment—avoiding facing the truth about his world and situation; he *doesn't* want to see things clearly, up close.

Lines 29-32 achieved some formal regularity, with a pattern of enjambments and end-stops. But that formal regularity disappears here, in lines 33-38. The lines are jagged and irregular free verse, with no clear pattern of enjambment. This radical shift in the poem's form is certainly disconcerting—but, again, it echoes the poem's themes. This is a poem about a culture in decay. And the poem itself feels decayed and damaged, a collection of fragments that never quite cohere—but whose incoherence tells a powerful story about the speaker's despairing frame of mind and the broken condition of his culture.

LINES 39-44

This is the ...
... a fading star.

In the first stanza of section 3, the speaker focuses on the poem's setting, which he describes a desert: "the dead land ... cactus land." This echoes the dryness from the first stanza, as the speaker described a world of rustling dead grass and heads "filled with straw."

At this point in the poem, the setting feels less and less literal. It doesn't seem like a *real* desert. Rather, the bleakness of the poem's setting seems like an extended metaphor for the decline

of European culture, a decline the speaker has gradually as his underlying concern in the poem. In other words, the desert he describes in lines 39-40 represents the condition of Europe: it has become a cultural desert, a culturally dead place without vibrancy or life.

And it has become a *spiritually* dead place as well. In lines 41-44, the speaker describes the "hollow men" erecting "stone images" and then praying to them—giving them, in his words, "the supplication of a dead man's hand." The "stone images" allude to passages in the Bible where the Israelites start worshipping false gods, which the Bible calls "idols" and "graven images." In other words, the "hollow men" are like the Israelites: they're worshipping the wrong gods, they've fallen into idolatry.

This is a key passage in the poem. It suggests that the hollow men's *real* problem is that they've lost their connection with God. And the stanza ends with a now-familiar symbol: the hollow men worship their false gods "under the twinkle of a fading star." Once again, the "fading star" is a symbol of hope—and once again, that hope is *fading* from the hollow men's world.

Like the previous sections of the poem, the third section is in loose free verse, with lots of enjambment (in lines 41-44) and lines of uneven length. It calls to mind some of the earlier moments in the poem. The repetitive, end-stopped lines that open the section, "This is the dead land / This is the cactus land," are reminiscent of the poem's opening: "We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men."

This echo encourages the reader to think about the hollow men and the landscape of the poem as being similar to each other. Perhaps the hollow men even affect the landscape, shaping it so it reflects their own image.

LINES 45-51

Is it like ...
... to broken stone.

In lines 45-51, the speaker wonders what life is like in "death's other kingdom"—in other words, in Heaven. Specifically, he's interested in the way that people relate to each other in Heaven, whether they are capable of touching each other, kissing, and embracing. In Hell (or the underworld, or some sort of purgatory—it remains ambiguous throughout), where the speaker and his comrades live, it seems impossible to do so. They wake up "alone," even though they are "trembling with tenderness" and their lips "would kiss." In other words, they *want* to be intimate and affectionate with each other, but they can't. Their hollowness extends to their relationships with other people, which leave them lonely and isolated, unable to bridge the gaps between them.

And so, instead of kissing each other, their "lips ... form prayers to broken stones." This refers back to the "stone images" in line 41—idols, false gods, that the "hollow men" worship. The speaker thus suggests that the hollow men engage in idolatry because they are lonely—they seek comfort and companionship from these false gods. This is a desperate measure, and the line implies that it doesn't work. Note, for instance, the consonant /r/ sound in the line: "form prayers to broken stone." The shared /r/ sound in "prayer" and "broken" suggests that the stones aren't the only broken things here: the prayers are equally broken, equally hopeless.

To this point, "The Hollow Men" has been formally consistent only in its inconsistency. The poem is written in free verse, with lines that shift around radically in their length and rhythm. These lines are a good example of that variability: line 47, has four syllables: "Waking alone." One could read this as a trochee and an iamb. But the next line, "At the hour when we are," has a totally different rhythm. As a result, the poem still feels jerky and inconsistent: more like a collection of fragments than a solid, unified piece—which is precisely the point. Much like the culture the speaker describes, the poem is falling to pieces, losing its integrity, becoming a broken and diminished object.

LINES 52-56

The eyes are ...
... our lost kingdoms

In lines 52-56, the speaker returns to a familiar symbol: "eyes." In lines 19-20, the speaker had alluded to passages in Dante's *Purgatory* and *Paradise*—in which Dante refuses to look his love, Beatrice, in the eyes because she was so pure, holy, and beautiful. The speaker thus uses "eyes" as a symbol for holiness, purity, and God—and God's capacity to watch over and judge people.

But, as the speaker reminds the reader throughout the poem, the "hollow men" have lost their connection with God: they worship false idols. So the speaker begins the poem's fourth section by reminding the reader, "The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here," where the hollow men are. The repetitive phrasing is reminiscent of other moments of repetition in the poem, like its first two lines, "We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men." The repetition makes it feel like the speaker is obsessive, stuck on the same idea.

The speaker says, in line 52, "The eyes are not here." In lines 54-56, he describes "here" a little bit more, extending his already detailed portrait of the poem's setting. He offers three different descriptions of that setting. First, he calls it a "valley of dying stars." Throughout the poem, the speaker has used stars as symbols of hope. But the stars here are "dying." So the line suggests that the "valley" is a place where hope dies.

Then in line 55, the speaker calls it a "hollow valley." This is an important moment: until now, the speaker has used the word "hollow" to describe the "hollow men." Using the same word to describe the poem's setting, the speaker suggests that the setting and the "hollow men" share the same condition, that they are linked together. The bleakness of the landscape is

reflected in the emptiness of the hollow men's lives and vice versa.

Finally, the speaker describes the setting as the "broken jaw of our lost kingdoms." This is a complicated metaphor. It suggests that the valley is like a broken bone, left over from the carcass of a "lost kingdom." In other words, it was once a key part of a large and powerful creature—a creature that has died, leaving only bones behind. The description reminds the reader of what's really at stake in the poem: the "lost kingdoms" represent the majesty of European culture, which has fallen into ruin.

The fourth section continues the formal pattern established in previous sections: it is written in loose free verse, sometimes highly enjambed; sometimes, as in lines 52-3, tightly repetitive and end-stopped. By now the reader as perhaps gotten used to the poem's jerky, strange rhythms, its uneven lines: the poem's formal disturbances eventually become almost numbing, just as the hollow men's experience of the landscape eventually numbs them to the horror of the world around them.

LINES 57-60

In this last ...
... the tumid river

In lines 57-60, the speaker describes in a bit more detail how the "hollow men" spend their time in the underworld, "this last of meeting places." In line 58, he notes that they "grope together." In other words, the "hollow men" are blind: they blunder around, trying to find their way. And they do so in silence: they "avoid speech," even though they are "gathered" together on the shores of a "tumid river."

This is another allusion to Dante: in the *Inferno*, the souls of the dead gather on the shores of the River Acheron, which surrounds Hell. The fact that the hollow men haven't crossed the river suggests that they actually aren't in Hell—they're not quite bad enough to end up there, nor good enough to go to heaven. As the speaker noted earlier in the poem, they're not especially "lost / Violent souls," but rather neutral, empty people. They haven't *deliberately* caused harm, but neither have they done much to stop harm from being done.

"Tumid" means "swollen" or "overflowing." So the river is about to flood, which is surprising, since the poem is set in a desert. But the river is as much a symbol as it is a literal place: it represents the violent energy of European culture after World War I, violent energy that, the speaker suggests, is only barely contained.

As the reader reaches this point in the poem, it gradually becomes clear that, like the poem's setting, the "hollow men" are not strictly literal figures. Rather, they serve (on one level, at least) as an extended metaphor for the shattered, disillusioned generation that fought in and survived World War I. If the landscape serves as an extended metaphor for the sorry state of European culture after the War, the "hollow men" serve as an image of the people who should be responsible for preserving and promoting that culture. In other words, the poem subtly suggests that the "hollow men" themselves are responsible for the failure of European civilization.

Like the first stanza of section 4, these lines are in free verse. They display the poem's formal instability: line 60 is quite long, while lines 58 and 59 are very short. As is the case throughout the poem, its uneven and irregular form registers the decay and decline that it describes: like the hollow men, their landscape, and the culture they represent, the poem is in a state of collapse.

LINES 61-67

Sightless, unless ...
... Of empty men.

In lines 61-67, the speaker continues to describe the "hollow men," focusing on their "sightless[ness]." Throughout the poem, "eyes" have served as symbols of holiness, purity, and God's judgement. To be "sightless," as the "hollow men" are, is thus to be distant from God.

Line 61 suggests that there might be some possibility of reconciling the "hollow men" with God. They are "sightless," the speaker admits. But, then there's a caesura, a pregnant pause that fills the reader with suspense. And the speaker adds "unless..." So, there is some hope, some chance they might regain their sight.

Lines 62-65 outline the conditions under which the "hollow men" might regain their sight. Their eyes have to "reappear / as the perpetual star." In other words—since stars are consistently symbols of hope in the poem—the "hollow men" need some hope that can survive even in the bleak landscape where they live. In lines 64-65, the speaker says what that hope would be: the "multifoliate rose / Of death's twilight kingdom."

The rose is a traditional symbol for the Virgin Mary. So the speaker is suggesting here that the "hollow men" need to renew their relationship with the Virgin Mary, that she holds the key to renewing their relationship with God. In other words, the speaker can imagine that the "hollow men" could be saved via faith—and by extension, the decline of European culture could be stopped, even reversed. But lines 66-67 make it clear that this is just a fantasy. The speaker calls it "The hope only / Of empty men." In other words, it's the kind of desperate, impossible dream that only people like the "hollow men" would indulge in.

Like the rest of the poem, this stanza is in free verse. Its lines are short—and more consistent in their length—than we find elsewhere in the poem. These lines are also almost entirely enjambed—only in line 67 does the poem arrive at an end-stop. The result is that the reader's eye speeds down these lines, looking for the source of the speaker's sudden, unexpected

hope—only to end in disappointment, as the speaker announces that the hope is "only" for "empty men."

LINES 68-71

Here we go ...
... in the morning.

Section 5 is very different from the first four sections of "The Hollow Men." That difference is apparent right away in lines 68-71. For starters, the lines italicized. And the italics indicate that, unlike the rest of the poem, these lines aren't spoken—they're sung. The speaker (and the "hollow men" with him) have suddenly broken into song. And they sing a deranged version of a traditional children's song.

In its standard version, the song goes, "Here we go 'round the mulberry bush / On a cold and frosty morning." Alluding to the song, the speaker changes its lyrics to better suit the bleak world where he lives. Instead of a "mulberry bush," he sings about "go[ing] round" a "prickly pear"—a kind of cactus, a plant of the arid desert. The speaker has taken a sweet, innocent children's song and transformed it into something singularly bleak. The allusion to the song thus underscores how consuming, how inescapable, the hollow men's world is.

The song also suggests that the "hollow men" are childish: adults who spend their time singing nursery rhymes. (The repetition of the phrase "prickly pear," specifically an example of epizeuxis, strengthens the feeling that there is something childish, even infantile about the song). At the same time, the song is full of harsh sounds, alliterative and consonant /p/, /r/, and /k/ sounds, These sounds are as sharp and cutting as the cacti themselves—as sharp and hostile as the world the "hollow men" inhabit.

Although a lot changes in section 5—for instance, the speaker suddenly bursts into song—the poem maintains many of its formal characteristics from the previous 4 sections. It remains in free verse, with uneven line lengths and unsteady rhythms. The sudden shifts in the poem's form remain as well. Where section 4 ended with a long string of enjambed lines, the first 4 lines of section 5 are all end-stopped. The poem's formal irregularity echoes the decay and decline it describes: like European culture, this poem is a broken, fragmentary object.

LINES 72-77

Between the idea ...
... is the Kingdom

After the "hollow men" finish singing in line 71, the poem takes another left turn. The speaker returns to the center of the poem and spends the next 20-odd lines describing a "Shadow." The speaker never directly tells the reader what the "shadow" is—though it seems to be a symbol for death, anxiety, and despair. Instead, the speaker lingers over its effects, describing what the "Shadow" does. It is a powerful and disruptive force. Over the course of the fifth section it intervenes in a wide range of natural processes, cutting them in half, preventing them from working properly.

In lines 72-75, the speaker introduces the reader to two things the "Shadow" messes up. It "falls" between "the idea / and the reality." In other words, it prevents ideas from being realized: it keeps people from acting on their ideas. And it "falls" between "the motion / and the act." The speaker uses the word motion in an obsolete sense here: it means "desire," not "movement." In other words, the shadow prevents people from acting on—and satisfying—their desires. The shadow thus isolates and paralyses people. They become like the "hollow men" with their "paralysed force." In a sense, then the "Shadow" explains how the "hollow men" ended up the way they are.

The stanza ends with a line in italics, indented into the middle of the page. In lines 68-71, italics indicated that the speaker had started singing. Here, they might indicate that a different voice has entered the poem: someone new is speaking here. This person knows the Bible and quotes directly from it. Line 77 is entirely drawn from the Book of Matthew; the full quote is "For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever." Where the speaker is distant from God, worships false gods, this new voice is capable of quoting directly from the Bible. It's not yet clear, though, how to interpret the other voice and its allusion to the Bible. Most plausibly, it reads as a rebuttal to the speaker's pessimism, his sense that the "Shadow" is all powerful.

As the poem enters this new phase, it establishes a strong formal pattern—the strongest and most persistent pattern in the poem. The next two stanzas will unfold in more or less the same way: with an indented, italicized final line in a different voice. The penultimate line of each stanza will be "Falls the shadow." The other lines of each stanza will be divided into couplets, each of which starts "Between..." and then lists two things, with an enjambment between the first thing and the second. The enjambment creates a pause, a gap—which almost seems like the space where the "Shadow" falls. Though the poem is still in free verse, it gains a strong pattern here—as though the speaker has finally figured out what he wants to say and is now saying it with confidence.

LINES 78-83

Between the conception ...
... is very long

Like the previous stanza, lines 78-83 focus on the "Shadow" and the chaos it causes. Here it "falls" between "conception" and "creation." This is a bit ambiguous. It could simply mean that it keeps people from inventing or creating things when they have an idea. Or it could refer more specifically to pregnancy, since "conception" is often used to describe the moment when an egg is fertilized. In other words, the "Shadow" might be cutting pregnancies short. Then, the speaker describes the "Shadow" falling between "emotion" and "response." In other words, it

keeps people from acting on their emotions. Once again, the "Shadow" is a powerful force that upsets the natural relationships between things like emotions and actions.

The stanza ends with another indented, italicized line. Like line 77, line 83 is a direct quote from another text, in this case Joseph Conrad's novel, *An Outcast of the Islands*. This allusion is harder to parse than the previous one. It might be best understood as a moment of compassion—as though new voice empathizes with the "hollow men" and their struggle. The new voice is acknowledging how difficult things are for them. It also reminds the reader of the poem's first epigraph, which is drawn from a different novel by Joseph Conrad—and, like "The Hollow Men," concerns the decay of European civilization. The allusion thus reminds the reader of the poem's stakes—this isn't just a poem about one person's sadness, but about a whole society falling apart.

These lines repeat the pattern introduced by lines 72-77. Like those lines, lines 78-83 constitute a six line stanza. The final line is italicized and indented; the stanza's fifth line is "Falls the Shadow." The first four lines of the stanza, lines 78-81, can be divided up into two couplets, each of which starts "Between" and lists two things, with an enjambment between the first and the second thing. To this pattern, lines 78-81 add a twist: "conception," "creation," and "emotion" all (sort of) rhyme with each other, building an especially strong rhythm through these lines. One feels the speaker's emotion mounting as he describes the power of the "Shadow."

LINES 84-91

Between the desire ...
... is the Kingdom

In lines 84-91, the speaker continues to describe the powerful and disruptive effects of the "Shadow." Here it falls between "desire" and "the spasm." In this case, its effects are sexual: it interrupts the connection between sexual desire and orgasm. These lines are physical, immediate: they concern bodily pleasure and sexual desire.

The rest of the stanza is more philosophical. The speaker describes the "Shadow" falling between "potency" and "existence." In other words, it takes the potential or possibility of something and keeps it from coming into existence. Then, the speaker describes the "Shadow" cutting off the "essence" from the "descent." This one is a bit harder to parse. It helps to know that in philosophy the "essence" of something is often understood to be its truth; in some schools of philosophical thought, real things, things that actually exist, are taken to be pale copies or imitations of this truth. In other words, they descend from the "essence." So, the "Shadow" interrupts this process. It stops things from becoming real, from making the descent from "essence" to reality. In the previous stanzas, the speaker had largely focused on the effects that the "Shadow" had on individuals. But here it becomes much grander: it intervenes in the fabric of reality itself, disrupting the structure of the world itself.

The stanza ends with another indented, italicized line. This line is an exact repetition of line 77; like that line, it is a direct quote from the Book of Matthew in the Bible. Like the previous instance of the line, it suggests that the other voice has a much more intimate relationship with God than the speaker does. And it also suggests a subtle critique of the speaker's pessimism, his obsession with the "Shadow." By quoting from the Bible, the other voice subtly reminds the speaker that God has more power and authority than the "Shadow"—and that God can set things right.

These poems continue the formal pattern established in lines 71-77. Lines 84-89 can be divided into three couplets (one more than the previous two stanzas). Each starts with the word "Between" and then lists two things, with an enjambment between the first and second thing. Then, the penultimate line of the stanza is an exact copy of the previous two stanzas: "Falls the Shadow." The stanza closes with an indented, italicized line that quotes from another text. This formal pattern—as powerful and driving as it has been—comes to an abrupt end after line 91. The poem returns to its jerky, variability: the speaker's energy and enthusiasm dissolving.

LINES 92-94

For Thine is ...
... Thine is the

In lines 92-94, the speaker tries to repeat the things he's heard from the other voice that enters in section 5—the quotes from the Bible and Joseph Conrad that the other speaker introduces. However, the speaker is unable to do so. Instead, he produces garbled, abbreviated versions of the other voice's quotes. "For Thine is the Kingdom" becomes "For Thine is." And "Life is very long" becomes simply "Life is." Finally, as though frustrated, the speaker tries one more time with the quote from the Book of Matthew—and manages to add one more word: "For Thine is the."

These abbreviated quotes show how hopeless the speaker's situation is. Though the other voice can quote fluidly from the Bible, the speaker can't. The best he can manage are incomplete, abbreviated versions. Instead of bringing him closer to God, these quotations show how far the speaker remains from God—and thus how far he is from repairing himself.

Formally, these lines break from the pattern established in the previous three stanzas. Those stanzas were carefully organized, with repeated lines and structured enjambments. These lines are much shorter; they follow no obvious pattern. (And this stanza itself is much shorter). After the energy and control of the previous three stanzas, these lines feel like a let-down, like the speaker has given up—all the energy going out of his poem. This is intentional: these lines dramatize his failure to

reproduce the quotes he hears from the other voice. With their broken, short lines, they echo the speaker's disappointment at his own failure.

LINES 95-98

This is the ...
... but a whimper.

The poem's final four lines mark another break from the patterns the poem has so far established. Once more, they're in italics. But this time it isn't clear what the italics represent. Perhaps the speaker is singing again—though there isn't an obvious reference to a well-known song, like in lines 68-71. Or maybe the other voice is speaking—though these lines are on the left margin, unlike the voice's other lines. Ultimately, it isn't clear *who* is speaking here. It might even be both—the speaker and the other voice—at once.

Whoever's speaking, they use these final lines to offer a bleak and insistent prophecy. "This is the way the world ends," they repeat three times before finally explaining what they mean: "Not with a bang with a whimper." This "whimper" refers back to the "hollow men" themselves—who are not "lost / Violent souls." There's nothing dramatic or grand about them: no big bang or violent conclusion. They're just slowly fading away, losing their capacity to act in the world—even to repeat the texts and quotations they hear, as in lines 92-4. The speaker of these lines is thus imagining the apocalypse, the end of the world. But instead of ending in fire or ice, they imagine simply fading into nothing—like the "hollow men" themselves.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are written in free verse. Unlike the rest of the poem, they are all end-stopped. The end-stops here mimic the apocalyptic events the speaker is describing: the world coming to an end. The speaker gets a sense of that finality, that closure, through the definite closure of each line.

SYMBOLS

STRAW

In line 4, the speaker says that the "hollow men" have "headpiece[s] stuffed with straw." In other words, they have straw inside their heads instead of brains. The poem is strange and surreal, so the reader might imagine this to be literally true—and picture a group of people with heads full of straw. But the "straw" here plays a primarily symbolic role. It represents the emptiness of the "hollow men." Straw is a proverbially worthless substance, something cheap, that animals eat. To have a head stuffed with "straw" thus suggests that the "hollow men" have nothing of value inside their minds: their thoughts are empty, useless, and worthless.

Straw was also used by children in England to create effigies of Guy Fawkes, the Catholic radical who tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament in the 1600s. (The poem's second epigraph, "a penny for the Old Guy" is something children would say to get money to make their Guy Fawkes effigies). These "stuffed" "straw" men thus seem to be effigies themselves: figures constructed to be burned.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "straw"

WIND

In line 8, the speaker notes that the "voices" of the "hollow men" are like "wind in dry grass." In other words, as he notes in line 7, they are both "quiet and meaningless." The wind here is thus a symbol for something meaningless and empty, devoid of human intelligence.

This is a surprising and potentially upsetting symbol. After all, the human voice is usually full of intelligence and meaning: it's what people use to communicate ideas, plans, and emotions with each other. But the hollow men's voices have lost this intelligence. They have become as empty and inhuman as the wind itself. The symbol repeats in lines 26 and 35, where the speaker uses it again to emphasize meaninglessness and emptiness of the world where the "hollow men" live—and their own emptiness as well.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "wind"
- **Line 26:** "wind"
- **Line 35:** "wind"

EYES

In lines 19-21, the speaker says something strange. There are "eyes" that he sees in his "dreams." He doesn't dare to look at these eyes: there's something troubling or embarrassing about them. But in "death's dream kingdom" those eyes "do not appear." It's clear that these "eyes" are powerful and important to the speaker, but it's not clear right away who they belong to—or what they represent.

This passage is at least in part an allusion to Dante's *Purgatory* and *Paradise*. When Dante encounters Beatrice—a woman he loves—in both of those poems, he can't look her in the eyes. She is so beautiful, pure, and holy that Dante feels like it would be disrespectful, even shameful to look at her with his own ordinary gaze. Through the allusion, then, the "eyes" become symbolic. The "eyes" are a symbol everything pure, holy, and good—as well as for truth and judgment.

The hollow men dare not meet these eyes because they don't want to be judged, don't want to face the truth of who they are.

By contrast, note how those "who have crossed ... to death's other Kingdom"—that is, who have moved on to Heaven—walked with "direct eyes." Where the hollow men avoid the judging gaze of "eyes" even in dreams, those other people have moved forward with eyes straight ahead, willing to look truthfully upon themselves and embrace judgment.

Indeed, the eyes ultimately can be thought of as a symbol for God and the way God watches over human life and judges human actions. In "death's dream kingdom," the speaker has lost contact with God and his watchful, judgmental eyes. Indeed, in "death's dream kingdom," eyes have lost their power: they become, simply, "sunlight on a broken column."

The speaker returns to "eyes" in the poem's fourth section. In lines 52-53, he notes "The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here." And in lines 61-62, he describes the hollow men as "Sightless, unless / The eyes reappear." The speaker continues to use "eyes" as a symbol in these instances, drawing on its resonance from earlier in the poem. The "eyes" continue to be symbols of God's power to judge and monitor peoples' lives. And the "sightless" "hollow men" have thus lost their connection with God—they are spiritually blind.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "eyes"
- **Line 19:** "Eyes"
- **Line 22:** "eyes"
- **Line 52:** "eyes"
- **Line 53:** "eyes"
- **Line 62:** "eyes"

BROKEN COLUMN

In lines 22-23, the speaker describes the "eyes" in "death's dream kingdom" as "sunlight on a broken column." These lines are complicated and difficult to parse—with different symbols and metaphors nesting inside of one other. In other to understand what's happening here, recall that, at the start of section II, the speaker uses "Eyes" as a symbol for God's judgement, the way God watches over human beings. The speaker sees these eyes "in dreams"—or he did, before he came to "death's dream kingdom." Here, "these do not appear." Instead they are "sunlight on a broken column."

The "broken column" might be a symbol for the decay of European culture. The column is closely associated with Greek and Roman architecture and, more broadly, with classical cultures—which were the foundation of European civilization. The "sunlight" is a metaphor for the way that God's judgment feels in the underworld, where the speaker and the "hollow men" live. So here, God, as "sunlight" on the "broken column," simply throws light on the decline and decay of European culture—instead of judging or shaping it.

In other words, the metaphor and the symbol, working together, suggest that God is not very powerful in the underworld, that he cannot do much to stop the decay of Western civilization, which the "broken column" symbolizes.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 23:** "broken column"

RAT'S COAT

In lines 32-33, the speaker describes himself wearing a series of "deliberate disguises," including a "Rat's coat." In other words, he is wearing rat's fur—or perhaps he is simply dressed up as a rat. Since rats often carry diseases and spread them to human beings, the rats serve here as symbols for disease itself. In describing himself as wearing a "rat's coat," the speaker thus treats himself as a carrier of disease: indeed, he is an embodiment of illness and sickness. The speaker thus understands himself as contagious: his desperate spiritual condition might spread to the people around him. As a "hollow man," he is someone who endangers others' health and well-being.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 33:** "Rat's coat"

CROWSKIN

After the speaker describes himself wearing a "Rat's coat" as one of his "deliberate disguises," he adds another disguise: "crowskin." The rat is a symbol of disease; the crow takes things further. It is a traditional symbol of death. In other words, by wearing "crowskin," the speaker makes himself into a symbol of death. And once again, the speaker subtly insists that he is a danger to human communities: that he brings not only sickness, but also death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 33:** "crowskin"

CROSSED STAVES

In lines 32-33, the speaker describes himself wearing a series of "deliberate disguises," including "crossed staves." The "crossed staves"—sticks or wooden poles—might represent scarecrows or the effigies of Guy Fawkes that the speaker references throughout. They serve as symbols, then, for the emptiness and inhumanity of the "hollow men." Instead of being real, flesh-and-blood human beings, they are made of straws and sticks; they are designed to be burned. This symbol thus breaks with the previous two, the "rat's coat" and

"crowskin" the "hollow men" wear. Where those were symbols of sickness and death—and suggested that the "hollow men" are dangerous to human society—the "crossed staves" suggest that the "hollow men" shouldn't be taken so seriously, that they're not actually all that scary. They're just scarecrows, effigies, built by children and designed to be burned.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 33:** "crossed staves"

STAR

Throughout the poem, the speaker uses stars as symbols. In line 25-28, the speaker notes that the "voices ... in the wind's singing / [are] more distant and more solemn / Than a fading star." In line 44, the speaker describes the "hollow men" praying to "stone images"—idols—"under the twinkle of a fading star." And in line 63, he describes the possibility that the hollow men's "eyes" will "reappear" as a "perpetual star."

In each of these cases, the stars have a consistent symbolic meaning. They represent hope and redemption. Their light promises that the suffering of the "hollow men" might be made meaningful, that the world they live in might be renewed. But the speaker describes them consistently as "fading": a "perpetual star" only appears as a fantasy, an impossible dream. In other words, there are symbols of hope in the poem, but they are fading fast, disappearing from the world in which the hollow men live.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 28:** "star"
- **Line 44:** "star"
- **Line 63:** "star"

TUMID RIVER

In line 60, the speaker describes the "hollow men" gathered together on the "beach of the tumid river." Tumid means "overflowing" or "swollen." In other words, the river is about to flood. This is a surprising image, since otherwise the speaker stresses the dryness and desolation of the world where the "hollow men" live. But the "tumid river" is at least partially a symbol. And as a symbol, it works well with the otherwise desolate, desert landscape of the poem. A "tumid river" is a violent river: a river that's about to flood and do serious damage to the landscape around it. As a symbol, then, the river suggests the violence of the European culture hasn't simply disappeared with the end of the First World War. Although Europe has become a desolate, ruined place, its violence could spill over at any point and do even more damage.

The river is also an allusion to the River of Acheron, which, in Dante's *Inferno*, makes up the border of Hell. The fact that the hollow men have not crossed this river—and instead are stuck on its "beach," or shore—indicates that they weren't especially good or bad in life; not good enough for Heaven, at least, and not bad enough for Hell. This reflects the earlier statement in section I, where the speaker says those who have crossed will remember the hollow men "not as lost / Violent souls," and instead as relatively impotent, "stuffed" figures.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 60:** "tumid river"

MULTIFOLIATE ROSE

In line 64, the speaker suggests that the hollow men's sight might return as a "mutifoliate rose." In other words, it might become a rose with a lot of leaves. This is metaphor: their eyes aren't going to literally turn into a rose. But, in order to understand the metaphor, one has to understand what the rose means symbolically. The rose is a traditional symbol of the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus in the Christian New Testament. In Catholicism, the Virgin Mary is even sometimes called the "mystic rose." For the hollow men's eyes to return as a "multifoliate rose" thus means that their sight will be restored by the Virgin Mary herself. The speaker seems to consider this unlikely, though. He calls it the "hope only / of empty men."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 64:** "Multifoliate rose"

SHADOW

In lines 76, 82, and 90, the speaker announces that "the Shadow" "falls." As the speaker describes it, "the Shadow" interrupts a series of key things. For instance, it cuts off an "emotion" from a "response." In other words, "the Shadow" makes it difficult for the hollow men to act on their emotions, or to move from having an "idea" and making it a "reality."

The speaker never explains what the "Shadow" is, but its symbolic characteristics give the reader some ideas. The shadow might symbolize fear, anxiety, or even death itself. These forces, the speaker suggest, cut off cause and effect, leading to a universe where nothing works right.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 76:** "Shadow"
- **Line 82:** "Shadow"

- **Line 90:** "Shadow"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

"The Hollow Men" is a poem about a decaying, disorganized world, and it often uses specific poetic devices to emphasize the disorder and chaos of the world it describes. That's the case with the poem's end-stops. When a poet uses end-stop in a regular pattern, it can give a poem a sense of organization: it's one of the ways a poet exhibits their control over their poem. But "The Hollow Man" has no such regular pattern when it comes to end-stops. Instead, its end-stops appear unpredictably, irregularly.

Often the poem will go long stretches without using end-stop at all, as in lines 61-67 (from "Sightless, unless ... Of empty men."): the stanza is entirely enjambed, at least until its final line. The end-stop, when it arrives in line 67, thus feels almost apocalyptic: like the end of the world.

That feeling is even stronger in the poem's final four lines. In contrast to the strongly enjambed stanza in lines 61-67, all of these lines are end-stopped (yes, even despite the lack of punctuation!). These end-stops underline the definitive ending that they describe: the end of the world, the apocalypse itself. As they do so, they also emphasize how disorderly the poem is: sometimes using long runs of enjambment, sometimes falling into steady, regular end-stops. The poem seems to work to prevent the reader from feeling comfortable, from feeling like there is an established pattern to hold on to.

To make matters even more confusing, the poem does not use punctuation in a standard way—so the reader has to pay attention to the structure of the speaker's sentences to tell where end-stops fall. For instance, line 30 ("In death's dream kingdom") has no punctuation at the end of it, but it marks the end of the sentence that starts in line 29, "Let me be no nearer…" In line 31, a *new* sentence with a parallel structure begins: "Let me also wear…" Line 30 is thus clearly end-stopped—but only a reader paying careful attention to the structure of the speaker's sentences would notice the end-stop. This means that there are some ambiguous cases in the poem, lines that could be called either end-stopped or enjambed, depending on how the reader interprets the poem's grammar.

For example, line 46 ("In death's other kingdom") might be the end of a question that starts in line 45 ("Is it like this"). Properly punctuated, the sentence would read, "Is it like this in death's other kingdom?" But one could also read the whole stanza as one long question, in which case line 46 would be enjambed.

The lack of regular punctuation thus makes the poem feel even more irregular and disordered: even the poem's punctuation seems to be decaying, losing its integrity. And it also makes it harder for the reader to arrive at a definitive sense of whether something is end-stopped or not.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "men"
- **Line 2:** "men"
- **Line 4:** "Alas!"
- **Line 10:** "cellar"
- **Line 11:** "colour," ","
- **Line 12:** "motion;"
- **Line 17:** "men"
- **Line 18:** "men."
- **Line 19:** "dreams"
- **Line 21:** "appear:"
- **Line 23:** "column"
- **Line 28:** "star."
- **Line 30:** "kingdom"
- **Line 32:** "disguises"
- **Line 36:** "nearer-"
- **Line 38:** "kingdom"
- **Line 39:** "land"
- **Line 40:** "land"
- **Line 44:** "star."
- **Line 46:** "kingdom"
- **Line 51:** "stone."
- **Line 52:** "here"
- **Line 53:** "here"
- **Line 54:** "stars"
- **Line 55:** "valley"
- **Line 56:** "kingdoms"
- **Line 58:** "together"
- **Line 60:** "river"
- **Line 67:** "men."
- **Line 68:** "pear"
- **Line 69:** "pear"
- **Line 70:** "pear"
- **Line 71:** "morning."
- **Line 76:** "Shadow"
- **Line 77:** "Kingdom"
- **Line 82:** "Shadow"
- **Line 83:** "long"
- **Line 90:** "Shadow"
- **Line 91:** "Kingdom"
- **Line 95:** "ends"
- **Line 96:** "ends"
- **Line 97:** "ends"
- **Line 98:** "whimper."

ENJAMBMENT

"The Hollow Men" uses enjambment often. In the first stanza of the poem, for instance, only four lines are end-stopped, lines 1,

2, 4, and 10. In this way, the lines mimic what they describe: like the whispering wind, they flow without interruption, pause, or structure.

This lack of structure is key to the poem, which doesn't use enjambment in a regular pattern. Sometimes, as in the first 10 lines, the poem is highly enjambed. But the speaker keeps the reader from feeling at ease by continuously switching things up, keeping a pattern from emerging. After the strongly enjambed first 10 lines of the poem, lines 11 and 12 ("Shape without form ... gesture without motion;") are both strongly end-stopped. As a result, the reader feels whipped back and forth, unsteady.

The poem's disorganized enjambments and end-stops thus contribute to the general sense of disarray that the poem describes. If the poem had a regular, predictable pattern of enjambments and end-stops, it might feel like the world it describes was logical, organized, and controlled. In the absence of such regular end-stops, the poem feels chaotic, disorganized, out of control—just like the bleak, decaying world the "hollow men" live in.

The speaker also doesn't follow the rule of punctuation: the first line of the poem, "We are the hollow men" is a complete sentence, but it doesn't end with a period or a colon. Instead, it has no punctuation at all. This might make it look enjambed, since lines that end without punctuation are usually enjambed. But it's grammatically complete on its own, and the next line is a completely new grammatical unit. So the line is end-stopped, but unless the reader is careful and pays close attention to the way the lines work, the reader might miss that. The poem's uneven and unusual punctuation further emphasizes the decay of the world it describes: even the rules of punctuation aren't working right.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "together / Headpiece"
- **Lines 5-6:** "when / We"
- **Lines 6-7:** "together / Are"
- **Lines 7-8:** "meaningless / As"
- **Lines 8-9:** "grass / Or"
- **Lines 9-10:** "glass / In"
- **Lines 13-14:** "crossed / With"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Kingdom / Remember"
- **Lines 15-16:** "lost / Violent"
- **Lines 16-17:** "only / As"
- **Lines 20-21:** "kingdom / These"
- **Lines 22-23:** "are / Sunlight"
- **Lines 24-25:** "swinging / And"
- **Lines 25-26:** "are / In"
- **Lines 26-27:** "singing / More"
- **Lines 27-28:** "solemn / Than"
- **Lines 29-30:** "nearer / In"
- **Lines 31-32:** "wear / Such"
- **Lines 33-34:** "staves / In"
- **Lines 34-35:** "field / Behaving"
- **Lines 35-36:** "behaves / No"
- **Lines 37-38:** "meeting / In"
- **Lines 41-42:** "images / Are"
- **Lines 42-43:** "receive / The"
- **Lines 43-44:** "hand / Under"
- **Lines 45-46:** "this / In"
- **Lines 47-48:** "alone / At"
- **Lines 48-49:** "are / Trembling"
- **Lines 49-50:** "tenderness / Lips"
- **Lines 50-51:** "kiss / Form"
- **Lines 54-55:** "stars / In"
- **Lines 55-56:** "valley / This"
- **Lines 57-58:** "places / We"
- **Lines 59-60:** "speech / Gathered"
- **Lines 61-62:** "unless / The"
- **Lines 62-63:** "reappear / As"
- **Lines 63-64:** "star / Multifoliate"
- **Lines 64-65:** "rose / Of"
- **Lines 65-66:** "kingdom / The"
- **Lines 66-67:** "only / Of"
- **Lines 72-73:** "idea / And"
- **Lines 73-74:** "reality / Between"
- **Lines 74-75:** "motion / And"
- **Lines 75-76:** "act / Falls"
- **Lines 78-79:** "conception / And"
- **Lines 79-80:** "creation / Between"
- **Lines 80-81:** "emotion / And"
- **Lines 81-82:** "response / Falls"
- **Lines 84-85:** "desire / And"
- **Lines 85-86:** "spasm / Between"
- **Lines 86-87:** "potency / And"
- **Lines 87-88:** "existence / Between"
- **Lines 88-89:** "essence / And"
- **Lines 89-90:** "descent / Falls"
- **Lines 92-93:** "is / Life"
- **Lines 93-94:** "is / For"
- **Lines 94-95:** "the / This"

CAESURA

"The Hollow Men" generally uses short lines. Though the poem is written in free verse—and therefore doesn't have a regular meter—its lines are often between four and six syllables. That means that it doesn't use a lot of caesura: the lines are just too short to have space for a break or pause in the middle of them. But there are exceptions to that rule—and because there are so few caesuras in the poem, those exceptions tend to be especially interesting.

There's a good example in line 61. In its entirety, the line reads, "Sightless, unless." The word "unless" offers some hope—the

"hollow men" might be "sightless," but the speaker suggests that there's some possibility, however faint, that they might regain their vision. The caesura splits the line neatly into two halves, "sightless" and "unless," emphasizing both the despair that the "hollow men" feel at being "sightless" and the hope that they still hold of regaining their sight. (Of course, the speaker eventually admits that this possibility is itself "the hope only / of empty men": in other words, it's a vain hope at best).

There are also caesuras in the center of both line 11 and line 12 ("Shape without form ... gesture without motion;"). The caesuras emphasize that each of the four short phrases that appear in those two lines are parallel with each other: they are each a description of the "hollow men" and build on each other. In this way, the caesuras guide the reader through the poem's complicated and sometimes ambivalent sentences.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "straw. Alas!"
- **Line 5:** "voices, when"
- **Line 11:** "form, shade"
- **Line 12:** "force, gesture"
- **Line 14:** "eyes, to"
- **Line 16:** "souls, but"
- **Line 22:** "There, the"
- **Line 24:** "There, is"
- **Line 33:** "coat, crowskin, crossed"
- **Line 42:** "raised, here"
- **Line 61:** "Sightless, unless"

ALLITERATION

"The Hollow Men" is a poem about a desolate world, full of empty, desperate people. The poem turns to sonic devices—like alliteration—to emphasize the desperation of the "hollow men" and to convey, through sound, the bleak character of their world. For example, in line 33, the speaker describes himself wearing a series of "deliberate disguises" (itself an alliterative phrase). He links together the disguises with an alliterative /c/ sound:

> Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves

Each of these disguises has symbolic weight. The rat (and its "coat") symbolize disease; the "crowskin" symbolizes death; "crossed staves" represent the straw effigies of Guy Fawkes that children in England burned. The "hollow men" are thus associated with disease, death, and emptiness. The alliteration binds together these separate symbols, suggesting that one should read them all together. Instead of thinking about each symbol on its own, the reader should focus on what they add up to: a portrait of the "hollow men" as dangerous for human life and human community.

Elsewhere, alliteration emphasizes how bleak and damaged the world of the poem is. Note, for instance, the /p/ alliteration in the song the hollow men sing at the start of section V:

> Here we go round the prickly pear
> prickly pear prickly pear

The close alliterations make their song sound childish, like a nursery rhyme—and that, in turn, emphasizes the infantile state into which the "hollow men" have descended. But the harsh /p/ sound—in combination with sounds like /r/ and /k/, which appear as consonance—also underlines the harshness of the prickly pear cacti the "hollow men" are singing about—and, more broadly, the harshness of the world the speaker describes. The poem's sound, the way it uses alliteration, thus lends support to its broader project: to describe a desolate, decaying world full of desperate people.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 33:** "c," "c," "c"
- **Line 68:** "p," "p"
- **Line 69:** "P," "p," "p," "p"

ASSONANCE

"The Hollow Men" describes a bleak, desolate world. The speaker often uses the poem's sound to emphasize how unwelcoming and inhospitable that world is—and to underline the emptiness of the "hollow men" who occupy it. Note, for instance, the assonant /a/ sound that appears in lines 8-9:

> As wind in dry grass
> Or rats' feet over broken glass

The /a/ sound links together the "grass," the "rats," and the "glass." With its harsh, rather grating /a/ sound, it emphasizes how dissonant and unpleasant it is to listen to the hollow men's voices. But also helps guide the reader through a complicated part of the poem, which might be hard to understand otherwise. These assonant words are part of two similes, one following the other. They both describe how "quiet and meaningless" the hollow men's "voices" are. Though the similes are very different—they compare the hollow men's "dried voices" to divergent, even opposite things—the shared sound shows the reader how to process these two similes. The emphasis is not on the difference between them, but rather the commonalities, the way they both characterize the hollow men's "voices" as inhuman, deprived of meaning.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses assonance to suggest the true sources of the hollow men's problem. Note the assonant /o/ sound that appears in line 64, "Multifoliate rose," and then in line 66, "The hope only..." The "multifoliate rose" (a rose with many leaves) is a symbol for the Virgin Mary. The assonance

between "rose" and "hope" emphasizes one of the speaker's underlying points—the "hollow men" have lost their connection with Christianity, and that's part of their problem. But the assonance continues, appearing also in "only." And that leads the reader into the next line, where the speaker notes that this "hope" is only for "empty men." It's too late for the hollow men, in other words: they can't get that connection back. The poem thus uses assonance to emphasize the hollow men's desperation—and the depths to which they've sunk.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "A," "a"
- **Line 9:** "a," "a"
- **Line 64:** "o," "o"
- **Line 66:** "o," "o"

CONSONANCE

As the speaker describes the "hollow men" and the dreary, desolate world where they live, he often turns to devices like alliteration and consonance to emphasize and underline his arguments and descriptions. Note, for instance, the consonant /r/ sound that appears in line 51:

> Form prayers to broken stone

Here, the "hollow men" are praying to "stone images." In other words, they've fallen into idolatry, praying to false Gods. For the speaker, this is a serious problem. Indeed, it's part of the reason they're so hollow: they've lost their link with God. The harsh /r/ sound links together "broken" and "prayers." In this way, it suggests that it isn't just the "stone" that's broken: the prayers too are broken, failed.

Elsewhere, consonance emphasizes the desolate character of the landscape where the "hollow men" live. In addition to the alliterative /p/ sound, the hollow men's song in lines 68-71, are full of consonant /r/ and /k/ sounds:

> *Here we go round the prickly pear*
> *Prickly pear prickly pear*

These /k/ sounds are harsh and percussive: as prickly as the cacti they describe. In this way, the sound of the poem gives the reader a sense of what it would be like to be in the landscape the speaker describes. It is not a soft, welcoming place: rather, like the consonant sounds that run through these lines, it is sharp, inhospitable, and violent.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 51:** "r," "r," "r," "r"

REPETITION

"The Hollow Men" uses repetition often, employing devices like anaphora, diacope, and parallelism. For instance, the poem opens with two parallel sentences, changing just a single word between them:

> We are the hollow men
> We are the stuffed men

These sentences also use anaphora (the repeated phrase "We are") and diacope (the repetition of the word "men). The combination of all three of the devices makes these opening lines feel very repetitive—almost heavy or ponderous. The speaker seems to be dwelling on his own "hollow[ness]," unable to move forward or think about other things.

This becomes, over the course of the poem, a consistent pattern: the speaker seems to keep getting stuck in repetitive descriptions of himself and the world where he lives, as in lines 52-53, where he repeats himself almost exactly:

> The eyes are not here
> There are no eyes here

Once again, the speaker seems bogged down. His own desolation and misery keep him from moving forward, thinking new thoughts. Elsewhere, the speaker uses parallelism in a less repetitive, but no less effective—as in lines 11 and 12, composed of four parallel phrases:

> Shape without form, shade without colour,
> Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

The parallelism shows the reader how to move through these phrases. Each phrase builds on the previous phrase; they are all descriptions of the "hollow men," and basically are just different ways of saying the same thing: the "hollow men" are incapable of acting in meaningful ways.

The repetition reaches its peak in the final section, almost all of which is repetitive. First, there's the deranged children's song that the "hollow men" sing:

> *Here we go round the prickly pear*
> *Prickly pear prickly pear*

The repetitions emphasize how childish the song is, how strange it is for a group of "men"—hollow or not—to spend their time singing it. After the song ends, the speaker uses a long series of parallel phrases:

> Between the idea
> and the reality
> Between the motion

and the act
Falls the Shadow

The speaker spends three full stanzas working out variations on these phrases. As a result, the speaker makes the "Shadow" seem very powerful: capable of upsetting and cutting off a wide range of key forces, from "idea[s]" to "desire."

Another voice also enters the poem in section 5. It's in italics and it's placed on the poem's right margin to indicate its difference from the voice of the speaker. This voice quotes directly from the Bible twice, "For Thine is the Kingdom," and from Joseph Conrad's novel *An Outcast of the Islands*, "Life is very long." The Bible quote is especially significant: it suggests an intimacy with God. The "hollow men" are unable to achieve this intimacy. When the speaker tries to repeat the quote, it comes out garbled, chopped off: "For Thine is," "For Thine is the." The incomplete repetition indicates that, though the speaker wants to return to the Bible, to use it to restore his intimacy with God, he is unable to do so. Repetition is thus key to the poem throughout, helping to convey the difficult and unfixable position the "hollow men" find themselves in.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion;"
- **Lines 17-18:** "the hollow men / The stuffed men."
- **Line 19:** "dreams"
- **Line 20:** "dream"
- **Line 22:** "There,"
- **Line 24:** "There,"
- **Line 29:** "Let me," "no nearer"
- **Line 31:** "Let me"
- **Line 35:** "Behaving as the wind behaves"
- **Line 36:** "No nearer-"
- **Lines 39-40:** "This is the dead land / This is cactus land"
- **Line 41:** "Here"
- **Line 42:** "here"
- **Lines 52-55:** "The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here / In this valley of dying stars / In this hollow valley"
- **Line 57:** "In this last of meeting places"
- **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."
- **Lines 72-76:** "Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow"
- **Line 77:** "For Thine is the Kingdom"
- **Lines 78-82:** "Between the conception / And the creation / Between the emotion / And the response / Falls the Shadow"
- **Line 83:** "Life is very long"
- **Lines 84-90:** "Between the desire / And the spasm / Between the potency / And the existence / Between the essence / And the descent / Falls the Shadow"
- **Line 91:** " For Thine is the Kingdom"
- **Lines 92-94:** "For Thine is / Life is / For Thine is the"
- **Lines 95-97:** "This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends"

SIMILE

"The Hollow Men" is an unsettling, uncanny poem. Its speaker often relies on simile to convey how strange its world is—and how empty the people who occupy it are. For instance, in the poem's first section, the speaker compares the hollow men's "dried voices" to "wind in dry grass" and "rats' feet over broken glass / In our dry cellar." In other words, as the speaker explains, their voices are "quiet and meaningless." But, even more significantly, they are also inhuman: the similes link the hollow men to inhuman forces, like the wind, and loathsome animals, like rats. They have lost their humanity; they have become less than human.

The speaker returns to this simile in lines 33-35, where he describes himself wearing "crossed staves" as one of his "deliberate disguises." In other words, the speaker is dressed up like a scarecrow. This disguise already makes him seem less than human. And he adds on to that with the simile in line 35: the scarecrow behaves "as the wind behaves." Instead of acting with intention and purpose, like a human being, the speaker rustles around without intelligence or plan, following, imitating, the unpredictable, intermittent gusts. In this way, the similes in the poem underline the speaker's loss of humanity—and in that way, make him seem especially creepy and uncanny.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **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"
- **Line 33:** "crossed staves"
- **Lines 34-35:** "In a field / Behaving as the wind behaves"
- **Lines 61-63:** "Sightless, unless / The eyes reappear / As the perpetual star"

METAPHOR

"The Hollow Men" is set in a bleak landscape and narrated by a desperate, hopeless speaker. The poem relies heavily on metaphor to create this sense of bleakness and hopelessness. For instance, there's a metaphor at the very heart of the poem: the speaker's description of himself and his comrades as "hollow men." They aren't *literally* hollow. Instead, they are metaphorically empty, depleted: all the joy, substance, and meaning has been sucked out of their lives. Similarly, the speaker describes himself as "stuffed"—an apparent

contradiction, since one can't be "stuffed" and "hollow" at the same time. But he is stuffed with "straw," a worthless substance. Again, he isn't *literally* full of straw: rather he wants the reader to understand that his life has become worthless, useless to him.

The speaker also uses metaphor to characterize the poem's setting. The speaker strongly suggests that the poem is set in the underworld, but he never directly says so. Instead he uses metaphors, calling it "death's dream kingdom" and the "twilight kingdom." As the poem proceeds these metaphors get weirder, harder to fully comprehend—as when the speaker describes the "hollow valley" where he and the "hollow men" live as the "broken jaw of our lost kingdom." Here the suggestion seems to be that the "hollow valley" isn't simply Hell—it's also a damaged or broken version of some grand, powerful "kingdom" that has fallen into disrepair. The poem's metaphors thus contribute to the poem's uncanny power: helping to make clear the emptiness of the speaker and the damaged, unreal quality of the world around him.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We are the ," "hollow men"
- **Line 2:** "We are the ," "stuffed men"
- **Line 4:** "Headpiece filled with straw"
- **Line 5:** "dried voices"
- **Lines 17-18:** "the hollow men / The stuffed men"
- **Line 20:** "death's dream kingdom"
- **Lines 22-23:** "the eyes are / Sunlight on a broken column"
- **Line 30:** "death's dream kingdom"
- **Line 38:** "twilight kingdom"
- **Line 54:** "this valley of dying stars"
- **Line 56:** "This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"The Hollow Men" contains two extended metaphors. These extended metaphors are key to understanding the poem. First, the "hollow men" at the center of the poem can be read as an extended metaphor for the generation of soldiers and civilians who survived World War I. The emptiness and despair that the "hollow men" experience is a way of registering the deeply shattered lives that many veterans lived in the wake of World War I. Second, the landscape of the poem, the desolate, barren wastes where the "hollow men" live serve as an extended metaphor for the decay of European culture after the War. For the speaker, Europe—once a grand, majestic culture—is falling apart, losing its nobility and diminishing its own accomplishments.

The poem doesn't make this obvious—it's possible to read the poem and not think about World War I at all. But the poem was written immediately after the War, and this context weighs heavily on it. The poem also does provide a couple of key hints for the reader. For example, in lines 22-3, the speaker uses a complex metaphor: saying, "the eyes are / Sunlight on a broken column." Without digging too deep into the complexities of this metaphor, the key thing to focus on is the "broken column." The column is a symbol for the accomplishments of European culture—indeed, columns are one of the defining features of classical architecture. They symbolize beauty, order, rationality—and they're broken here. This suggests that European culture is in decline, no longer capable of taking care of its own past accomplishments: and the "hollow men" themselves seem to be responsible. They haven't been taking care of the "column[s]."

Similarly, the speaker also describes the "hollow valley" as the "broken jaw of our lost kingdoms." The setting itself is a representation of a damaged, broken community. And it shares something key with the speaker and his comrades. Like them, it is "hollow." These subtle hints help the reader draw a strong relationship between the poem's historical context and its strange, surreal characters and settings: these characters, this setting, help the poem reflect on the shattered state of Europe and Europeans after the First World War.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18
- Between Lines 18-19
- Lines 19-38
- Between Lines 38-39
- Lines 39-51
- Between Lines 51-52
- Lines 52-67
- Between Lines 67-68
- Lines 68-98

ALLUSION

"The Hollow Men" is full of allusions to religious and literary texts. Each of these allusions is important to the poem. But before diving into them individually, it's worth thinking about the effect of having a poem with so many different allusions, stacked one on top of the other. The poem feels almost like a junk-heap, a trash pile, into which the scattered pieces of European literature have been swept. In other words, the allusions reflect the poem's larger message. The poem depicts European culture in decline, unable to maintain its past triumphs—which, like the "broken column" in line 23, have fallen to pieces. The poem itself is composed of such pieces, fragments of past literary works. With its patchwork of quotations and allusions, the poem itself is an image of a culture in decline, whose masterpieces have been reduced to tatters and scraps.

The allusions begin with the poem's two epigraphs. The first is drawn from Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. It refers to a character from the novel, Captain Kurtz—an ivory trader in

colonial Africa—who goes mad and disappears into the bush. Like the "hollow men," Kurtz is a stand-in for European society in decline: he loses his connection with the so-called civilized values of that culture.

The second quote, "A penny for the old guy," refers to a holiday in England that celebrates the capture of Guy Fawkes, who planned to blow up Parliament in 1605. Children traditionally constructed effigies of Fawkes out of straw on burned them on the anniversary of his capture, November 5th; they would ask strangers for money to buy materials for their effigies with the phrase, "A penny for the old guy?" Fawkes appears again in line 4, where the speaker describes the hollow men as having "headpiece[s] filled with straw." He is a reflection of the hollow men's emptiness and inhumanity.

In lines 19-20, the speaker alludes to key passages in Dante's *Purgatory* and *Paradise*. In these poems, when Dante encounters his great love, Beatrice, he cannot meet her gaze. She is an image of holiness and purity—so holy and so pure that Dante feels it would be disrespectful to even look at her. Through the allusion to Dante, the "eyes" thus become symbolic of God, and God's holiness and purity. The speaker alludes to Dante again in line 60: the "tumid river" is an allusion to the River Acheron, which surrounds Hell in the *Inferno*.

The fifth section of the poem is especially full of allusions. The opening song is an allusion to the children's song "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush." The speaker rewrites the song to make it reflect the bleak, desolate setting of the poem. Then a new voice enters the poem and quotes directly from the Book of Matthew in the New Testament: "For Thine is the Kingdom." The full passage is "For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever." This other voice also quotes from Joseph Conrad's novel, *An Outcast of the Islands*. The speaker tries to repeats these quotes but ends up garbling them, producing strange, abbreviated versions in lines 92-4, "For Thine is / Life is." These abbreviated quotations emphasize the general function of allusion in the poem. It indexes the broader collapse of European culture—reduced to a series of garbled, abbreviated fragments.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** "Mistah Kurtz-he dead / A penny for the Old Guy"
- **Line 4:** "Headpiece filled with straw"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Eyes I dare not meet in dreams / In death's dream kingdom"
- **Line 60:** "this beach of the tumid river"
- **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."
- **Line 77:** "For Thine is the Kingdom"
- **Line 83:** "Life is very long"
- **Line 91:** "For Thine is the Kingdom"
- **Lines 92-94:** "For Thine is / Life is / For Thine is the"

VOCABULARY

Mistah Kurtz (Before Line 1) - Mister Kurtz is a character in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. Kurtz, a European ivory trader in colonial Africa is seen as a symbol of European progress and enlightenment, but goes insane, disappears into the jungle, and makes himself into a god-like figure.

Old Guy (Before Line 1) - This is a reference to Guy Fawkes, who plotted to blow up Parliament on November 5, 1605. He was caught before he could do so, however, and he was eventually executed for treason. In England, children would make effigies of him out of straw and burn them every November 5th, a holiday called "Guy Fawkes Day." Children would ask strangers for money to build their effigies, demanding "a penny for the old guy."

Headpiece (Line 4) - Head or skull.

Paralysed (Line 12) - Frozen, unable to move.

Gesture (Line 12) - Action or movement.

Motion (Line 12) - Desire or inclination. The speaker uses the word in a now obsolete sense. Instead of indicating physical motion—say waving a hand or flexing a foot—it indicates an appetite, a hunger, even lust.

Solemn (Line 27) - Serious or somber.

Deliberate (Line 32) - Carefully designed or concocted.

Crowskin (Line 33) - The skin of a crow. In fly-fishing, a "skin" refers to the feathers of a bird.

Staves (Line 33) - Sticks or staffs, dried pieces of wood.

Supplication (Line 43) - A gesture that suggests submission to a higher power or authority. Usually, one assumes this position when one wants something from someone powerful. So, for instance, a "supplicant" is someone who makes a request or asks a favor from someone powerful. This powerful person or entity might include God Himself; prayer is often described as a kind of supplication.

Grope (Line 58) - Move forward blindly, feeling the way with one's hands.

Tumid (Line 60) - Swollen or overflowing.

Perpetual (Line 63) - Undying, endless, immortal.

Multifoliate (Line 64) - Having many leaves.

Thine (Line 77, Line 91, Line 92, Line 94) - Yours. The word is obsolete; when it was in everyday use, it was more informal than "yours." It would indicate intimacy, closeness, with someone. Here it is quoted from the Bible: the "you" that the

speaker is addressing is God.

Conception (Line 78) - Having an idea or plan. The word also has a religious sense: Jesus's birth is often called the "Immaculate Conception," since His mother, Mary, was a virgin.

Creation (Line 79) - Acting on an idea or plan, making it real. This could refer to creation in the general sense, and also, as with "conception," have some religious connotations. Perhaps it references birth—the "creation" of a person—which is severed from "conception" by this mysterious "Shadow."

Spasm (Line 85) - Orgasm, sexual satisfaction.

Potency (Line 86) - The power to make or create something.

Existence (Line 87) - Something that exists, that's real—and therefore has been created.

Essence (Line 88) - The ideal or core of something.

Descent (Line 89) - Decline or decay.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Hollow Men" does not follow a standard form. Instead, the poem is written in free verse and broken up into five sections differentiated by numerals. It doesn't have a regular rhyme scheme or meter, and its stanzas vary in length: some as short as two lines, some as long as ten. As a result, the poem can feel chaotic, even disorganized: it never establishes a pattern; as soon as the reader gets used to something, the poem changes.

In a poem about the traumas of World War I and the failure of European culture, this formal disorganization is important and significant. Poetic forms like the sonnet or the sestina are often felt to be impressive and important parts of the legacy of European cultures. The poem's failure to adhere to those forms is another sign that Europe is breaking down, losing its cultural power. The poem becomes another piece of "broken stone," another piece of evidence that magnificence of European culture is decaying.

The first section of the poem provides a good example of this. The first 10 lines of the poem are relatively organized. Though they don't exactly fall into a set meter, they're generally around six syllables a line. And there are a number of rhymes and slant rhymes, like "men" and "when" and "Alas" and "meaningless." Even if the poem doesn't follow a set form, it feels like it could, like it's almost there: just on the brink of being formally organized.

But lines 11 and 12 break this shaky, partial formal pattern. They are much longer: 9 and 10 syllables, respectively. And the speaker switches from a sustained 10-line stanza to a couplet. Just as the poem starts to gain momentum and coherence, the couplet interrupts that momentum. And the next stanza doesn't reestablish the shaky pattern from the first stanza. Reading through the first section of the poem, one experiences its form as something broken, in tatters—just like the civilization the poem describes.

METER

"The Hollow Men" is written in free verse, which means that it doesn't follow a set meter. Some free verse poems nonetheless find a solid, steady rhythm. A poem like Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" is a good example of this: though the number of syllables in each line changes, the poem uses anaphora and other devices to create a strong rhythm. "The Hollow Men" is different: the poem's rhythm keeps changing, shifting. It never settles down, never finds a solid, steady pattern.

Take a look at lines 45-51, for example. The shortest line, line 47, has three syllables: "Wak*ing* a*lone*." One could describe this as iambic dimeter (a line of two iambs, which are poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern) with an initial trochee (stressed-unstressed)—a very unusual meter. But there's no point in doing so, because that meter never reappears in the stanza.

By comparison, the next line, "*At* the *hour* when we *are*" could be broken into two trochees and an iamb. The rhythm is totally different. This means that the reader doesn't really experience the poem as having a rhythm. After all, rhythm requires repetition, a pattern. "The Hollow Men" no sooner establishes a pattern than it breaks it again.

In this way, the poem's meter models the chaos and emptiness that the poem describes. The poem lines are like "the broken stones" to which the hollow men pray. And, like the "hollow men" the poem's meter is "shape without form … gesture without motion." In a broader sense, then, the poem's meter echoes the poem's critique of European civilization—a civilization that the speaker thinks is in decline, losing its coherence.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Hollow Men" does not follow a standard rhyme scheme. It does use some rhyme—just not in a predictable, orderly way. Instead, rhymes come and go, appearing in short bursts and then disappearing again. For instance, in lines 78-80, the speaker rhymes "conception," "creation," and "emotion." These rhymes are very weak, since they only rhyme the last syllable of each word. But they do create a sense of momentum and organization: the poem seems to be speeding up, becoming more and more passionate and intense. Then, without warning, the rhyme disappears: lines 81 and 82 end with the words "response" and "shadow"—which don't rhyme with each other or rhyme with the previous lines.

This happens often in the poem: the speaker will employ rhyme for a little bit, giving the reader the sense that the poem is starting to fall into a rhyme scheme and then abruptly break it off. And the speaker often also uses partial or failed kinds of

rhyme, like that slant rhyme between “meaningless” and “grass” in lines 7-8. For the reader, the poem thus feels jerky: it keeps starting and stopping, accelerating and braking. It never settles into a comfortable rhythm, a steady set of rhymes.

The poem’s erratic and unpredictable rhymes thus mirror the state of decay and desolation that the poem describes. Like the “hollow men,” who seem unable to complete anything they start, who are “gesture without motion,” the poem’s rhymes gather energy only to see it disappear. The poem's rhymes are as lethargic and defeated as the "hollow men" are.

SPEAKER

The speaker of “The Hollow Men” is part of a group of exhausted, defeated people: he calls them, in the poem’s first line, “the hollow men.” Speaking for this group, the speaker describes them as empty, without substance. In line 4, he says their heads are “filled with straw,” and in line 7, that their voices are “quiet and meaningless.” Instead of helping or taking care of each other, they spend their time groping around blindly and “pray[ing] to broken stone,” as the speaker notes in line 51. In other words, the “hollow men” are worse than empty and ineffective—they are praying to the wrong gods. For a Christian poet like Eliot, this is a serious problem.

The speaker never clarifies who these “hollow men” are exactly—how many people make up the group, where they come from, how old they are. If they had lives before they arrived in the desolate, desert world where they live, the speaker doesn’t acknowledge or explain it. Their past has been cut away from them: all they have is this empty, bleak world.

The lack of specific, concrete detail about the speaker and the fantastical, uncanny character of the world they live in—a world which the speaker repeatedly suggests is some version of Hell or purgatory—have led many readers to understand the speaker (and the “hollow men”) more generally as an extended metaphor for the state of European Culture after the First World War. In this reading, the “hollow men” represent the generation that fought in and survived the war—emerging from it permanently scarred, unable to participate in or preserve their culture.

In the fifth section of the poem, another voice enters. The poem marks it as different by putting it in italics and orienting it on the right margin of the poem. This voice quotes from two different texts, the Bible and a novel by Joseph Conrad, *An Outcast of the Islands*. This other voice is able to recite directly and precisely from these texts. This is especially striking with the Biblical quotations, because it suggests an ongoing intimacy with God. The speaker of the rest of the poem doesn't have that intimacy. When he tries to repeat the quotes in lines 92-4, he is only capable of producing fragments of them: "For thine is the." It might be possible for someone to have an intimate relationship with God—but not for the "hollow men." Even when they hear words straight from the Bible, they can only reproduce damaged, useless fragments of it. And the final four lines add one more wrinkle: it's not clear *who* is speaking as the poem ends—the speaker, the other voice, even both at once.

SETTING

The speaker describes the poem's setting, several times and in several different ways, as some version of either Hell, the underworld, or purgatory. In section II, the speaker calls it “death’s dream kingdom.” In section IV, the speaker calls it “death’s twilight kingdom.” Because these descriptions are so different from each other, some readers have thought that sections II and IV, each describe a separate place, a separate “kingdom” of death. This is a plausible and convincing reading of an ambiguous and difficult poem. But it could be, equally, a single place that the speaker describes in different ways over the course of the poem.

In any case, the landscape of the underworld, as the speaker describes it, is consistently bleak and desolate. The speaker calls it “cactus land”: a desert. It seems to be a distinctly hopeless place: the speaker calls it a “valley of dying stars.” It is full of ruins and damaged objects, “broken stone” and “broken column.” These ruins serve as symbols for a European culture, and their damaged status suggest that culture is in decline. But it is not entirely a desolate desert: it also contains a “tumid river”—that is, an overflowing river. It is at once dry, bleak—and about to flood. This river is an allusion to the Acheron river, which in Dante's *Inferno* surrounds Hell. The fact that the hollow men sit on the shores of the river suggests they're indeed in a sort of purgatory; that they aren't *actively* malicious forces, but rather, in their indifference, cowardice, or timidity, also haven't actively sought to do good in the world.

It's possible to read the poem’s setting as an extended metaphor for the cultural condition of Europe after the First World War, just as the speaker (and the “hollow men” he speaks for) serves as an extended metaphor for the shattered lives of the generation that fought in the war. Like the speaker, the landscape is a register for the contradictions and traumas of that culture: it is simultaneously damaged and desolate (represented by the desert) and overflowing with violent energy (represented the river). It is stuck in a sort of stagnant purgatory, with hope fading, distanced from truth and God. This is a world slowly petering out—as the speaker says, "Not with a bang but a whimper."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

“The Hollow Men” is one of the most famous poems of a literary

movement called "Modernism." Modernism began in Europe around 1870 and lasted until about 1945. "Modernism" is an umbrella term, developed by scholars after the movement was finished, to describe a wide array of writers and artists—often with very different, even opposite aims and goals. However, there are some underlying interests that unite these groups. All of these artists confronted a society that was radically changing: becoming more urban, more industrial, less rural, less agricultural, less bound by tradition and religion. They wanted to develop new artistic and literary forms, and they felt that the old ways of painting and writing weren't appropriate for the new realities of their societies. They simply couldn't describe the changes that society was undergoing—because they emerged from a much older social order.

Some of these artists were excited and enthusiastic about the changes in society. Others mourned the loss of the old world. T.S. Eliot was one of those who felt deeply alienated by the changes to society and wanted to recover the past. At the same time, Eliot recognized that these changes were so big and important that it would be almost impossible to do so. So he tried to develop poetic forms, ways of writing, that would express his own sense of alienation and loss.

In his poems from the 1920s, in particular—poems like "The Hollow Men" and "The Wasteland"—Eliot turns to fragments, assembling scraps together to form poems that jump around unpredictably. These fragments are supposed to register a society that's decaying, falling apart, losing its identity. "The Hollow Men" is thus a prime example of a modernist poem. It tries to express the shattered condition of European culture after the First World War—and it does so by breaking the traditional rules of poetry. It is innovative, inventing new ways of writing. But its innovation is designed to demonstrate to the reader the extent of the damage which the War has done to its speaker—and the culture he represents.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Hollow Men" was written over the early 1920s. The finished version first appeared in 1925, but it brings together pieces that Eliot had written and published as early as 1921. The poem was thus written in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, a catastrophic and world changing event. Though Eliot did not fight in the war, one of his closest friends, Jean Verdenal, did and died at the Battle of Gallipoli in 1915. (Some scholars have speculated that the two were lovers.)

Like many in his generation, Eliot was devastated by the war. It was, for one thing, a very bloody war, with millions dead on both sides. And as the war dragged on, it became harder and harder to justify. In bloody battles in France, hundreds of thousands of soldiers were slaughtered in exchange for a few inches of ground. The war created a crisis of confidence in European culture. Before the war, many were deeply confident that European countries had advanced so far that they no longer need war, that they were past violence and barbarism. The intense violence of the War showed that just the opposite was true: that the increased power of industrial societies allowed for killing on a scale never seen before in human history. After the war, traumatized by the violence they'd seen and adrift in a culture that had lost confidence in itself, many members of Eliot's generation became pale shells of their former selves: "hollow men."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Modernism — A brief article on modernism, from the Norton Anthology of English Literature. (https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/20century/topic_2_05/welcome.htm)
- World War I Timeline — A detailed timeline on World War I, put together by the BBC. (https://www.bbc.com/timelines/zqbhn39)
- Who Was Guy Fawkes? — An article about Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot from National Geographic. (https://www.nationalgeographic.com/archaeology-and-history/magazine/2017/11-12/history-the-explosive-truth-about-guy-fawkes/)
- T. S. Eliot Reads "The Hollow Men." — Listen to T. S. Eliot recite his own poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAWaZqDf-VE)
- Biography of T. S. Eliot — A detailed biography of T. S. Eliot, from Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/t-s-eliot)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER T. S. ELIOT POEMS

- Journey of the Magi
- Preludes
- Rhapsody on a Windy Night
- The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

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