TS Eliot’s

THE HOLLOW MEN
When T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) became a British citizen in 1927, he also joined the Anglican Church. He was deeply religious and affirmed the traditionalism, hierarchy, and conservatism of High Anglicanism. Although “The Hollow Men” has many religious references, Eliot is not affirming Christianity but rather lamenting its absence in the modern world.
INTRODUCING THE POEM

**Bleak View of Humanity**

When Eliot wrote “The Hollow Men,” he believed humanity was suffering from a loss of will and faith.

The poem reflects this point of view, portraying a world without religion or promise of salvation.
**Mister Kurtz is dead.**

The first line after the title of the poem is an allusion or reference, to Joseph Conrad’s famous short novel *Heart of Darkness*.

Kurtz journeys to the center of Africa and rapidly loses his mind, falling into intense paranoia. The line refers to a character who is emotionally dead long before he is physically dead.
“A penny for the Old Guy”

The second line in the poem alludes to one of the most notorious incidents in British History, the Gunpowder Plot.

In 1605, Guy Fawkes, a soldier, was chosen to light the fuse that would ignite barrels of gunpowder in the cellars of Parliament.

King James I, and others, would die.
The plot failed. Fawkes was sentenced to be hanged, drawn, and quartered.

Every year on November 5, huge bonfires are set all over England.

Straw-filled effigies of Fawkes, called “guys,” are burned. These are the “stuffed men” alluded to in the poem.
Children join the fun by carrying a “guy” and becoming beggars who ask passersby to give them “a penny for the guy” so that they can buy fireworks.
A Wealth of Allusions

Eliot’s poem is full of other allusions, especially to works by Shakespeare and Dante.

1. **hollow men**: allusion to Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (Act IV, Scene 2, lines 23 – 27): “hollow men . . . sink in the trial” (fail when put to the test).
13-14 Those ... Kingdom: Those with “direct eyes” have crossed from the world of the hollow men into Paradise. The allusion is to Dante’s *Paradiso*. 
Line 44 Under the twinkle of a fading star: an allusion to Dante, who used the star to symbolize God.
60 tumid river: Hell’s swollen river, the Acheron, in Dante’s *Inferno*. The damned must cross this river to enter the land of the dead.
ALLUSION

- 64 multifoliate rose: Dante describes Paradise as a rose of many leaves
- 77 For ... Kingdom: closing lines of the Lord’s Prayer: “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever.”
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.

- Look for a second allusion to this children’s rhyme
88-89 between ... descent: The Greek philosopher Plato defined “the essence” as an unattainable ideal and “the descent” as its imperfect expression in material or physical reality.
PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

“The Hollow Men” was written in 1923, shortly after the end of World War I - a major event that had a devastating impact on Great Britain.

- Hundreds of thousands of young men were lost in combat.
- The old British Empire and many of its traditions were toppled.
Knowledge

- *hollow* means “empty”
- *a straw man* is a dummy, not a real person

+ text

= inference

Eliot’s poem expresses the hopelessness many felt after World War I.
Reading Between the Lines

In a 1923 essay, Eliot claims that contemporary history reveals an “immense” futility and anarchy.
READ THE POEM

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AO4DeDWjoZ0&feature=fvst
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FlaSbNGz3g
Lines 1-10 What inferences can you draw about the hollow men so far?

The hollow men cannot think. Their “dried voices” like “rats’ feet over broken glass” suggest the futility of their actions.
Lines 11-12 What paradoxes are listed in these lines?

The paradoxes “shape without form,” “shade without color,” and “gesture without motion” suggest that men are one-dimensional.
Philosophical Context

- **Lines 1-18** What does Eliot’s description of “hollow” and “stuffed” men tell you about his outlook on humanity?

  He sees people as one-dimensional and purposeless.
**Lines 1-18** What does it mean for the hollow men to be both “hollow” and “stuffed”? 

They are hollow in that they have no core or substance and are instead stuffed with dead matter. Their condition is paradoxical; they are full, but filled with worthless straw, so they might as well be empty.
Who are “Those who have crossed / With direct eyes”?

They are the blessed. They possess souls and a capacity for spiritual commitment.
Lines 13-28 (The Hollow Men) In contrast to those with “direct eyes,” what qualities do the speaker and the other hollow men lack?

They are blind in the sense that they do not have insight. They lack souls and the capacity to believe in anything that will help them achieve salvation.
PARAPHRASE

Lines 37-38 What might the “final meeting / In the twilight kingdom” be? How might this explain what the speaker is afraid of?

It might be death or damnation. The speaker might fear death, but more importantly fear punishment in Hell.
Lines 39-44 What kind of setting is described here? How is this setting appropriate to the nature of the hollow men?

These lines describe a lifeless desert; the description reflects the barren interior of the hollow men.
Line 44 The image of the star is an allusion to Dante, who used the star to symbolize god. Of what do “stone images” make you think? What might “prayers to broken stone” be?

The phrase “stone images” alludes to the “graven images” of the Bible. “Prayers to broken stone” suggests both powerless please and weak idols.
Lines 52-60 What does Eliot emphasize about the hollow men’s ability to see and to speak?

- The hollow men are unable to see (lines 52–53);
- they cannot speak (line 56, lines 58–59).
Lines 52-60 By depicting the group of hollow men as massed together without speaking to or seeing one another, what larger point might Eliot be making about the human condition?

People are alienated from each other; even when crowded together, modern people are trapped in a state of loneliness.
Lines 68-71 How would you interpret going around and around a prickly pear – a type of cactus?

The circular motion symbolizes a fruitless, repetitive existence. The prickly pear could be seen as threatening or foreboding.
Lines 95-98 What does it mean for the world to end with a “whimper” instead of a “bang”?

A “whimper” is pathetic and hardly noticeable, supporting the idea that the hollow men’s lives have no meaning. A “bang” on the other hand, might signify a victory or at least a dramatic effect.
**LITERARY ANALYSIS**

- **DRAW CONCLUSIONS** How do you interpret Section V of “The Hollow Men?” What do you think keeps the hollow men from fulfillment? Support your conclusions with textual evidence.

  Section V conveys the idea that the hollow men are unable to complete an action; they are trapped by their own futility. Because they are unable to conceive of immortality, their lonely, bland lives simply end.
How would you describe the view of the future expressed in the final four lines of the poem?

The view of the future is pessimistic, hopeless, and ultimately disappointing.
ANALYZE SOUND DEVICES  Eliot often uses sound devices to connect his fragmentary images. Re-examine “The Hollow Men,” noting examples of rhyme, alliteration, and consonance. Describe the effect these sound devices have on the poem.
SOUND DEVICES

- **Rhyme:**
  - grass/glass (lines 8, 9)
  - swinging/singing (lines 24, 26)
  - are/star (lines 25, 28)
  - staves/behaves (lines 33, 35)
  - land/hand (lines 40, 43)
  - alone/stone (lines 47, 51)

- **Alliteration:**
  - “when / We whisper” (lines 5–6)
  - “death’s dream kingdom” (line 20)
  - “deliberate disguises” (line 32)
  - “coat, crowskin, crossed staves” (line 33)
  - “Trembling with tenderness” (line 49)
SOUND DEVICES

- **Consonance:**
  - “hollow valley” (line 55)
  - “essence . . . descent” (lines 88–89).

- *Eliot’s use of musical language makes his dismal images even more disturbing.*