

NO-NONSENSE NOTES

The Hollow Men



HSC MODULE B – CRITICAL STUDY OF LITERATURE

The Hollow Men

T.S. Eliot (1925)

Comprehensive Annotations, Study Notes
and Essay Resources

How to Use This Document

This resource is designed for students preparing for the **HSC Module B: Critical Study of Literature** examination, with a focus on T.S. Eliot's poem *The Hollow Men* (1925). It brings together close reading, annotated poem text, thematic analysis, contextual background, poetic device reference, comparative frameworks, and model essay material in a single cohesive document.

Structure of this document:

- **Introduction and Thesis** sets out the core argument and the Module B framing.
- **Key Concepts and Definitions** establishes the critical vocabulary you need before engaging with the poem.
- **Sections I–V** each include the poem text, a plain-language summary, and a detailed annotation table.
- **Line-by-line analysis** of selected key passages offers extended close reading.
- **Themes, Symbols, Poetic Devices, Form and Metre, and Context** provide the analytical scaffolding for your responses.
- **Comparative Analysis** maps *The Hollow Men* against the other prescribed poems in Eliot's suite.
- **Essay Resources** include model paragraphs, structural breakdowns, Band 6 strategy notes, and practice prompts.
- **Supplementary material** offers vocabulary, an intertextual reference table, and space for additional notes.

HSC Key Point

For Band 6, never list techniques in isolation. Every technique must serve a larger argument about how Eliot's **textual integrity** – the organic unity of form, language, and ideas – constructs meaning.

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Introduction and Thesis

T.S. Eliot's unification of artistic language, fragmented form, and a raw, bleak depiction of the urbanised British landscape pioneers the **Modernist vision** and subverts the optimistic Romantic perspective of nineteenth-century conceptions of nature and the world as beautiful and awe-inspiring.

The Hollow Men (1925) portrays the **Everyman's disillusionment** with society due to the advent of industrial change leading to spiritual and social decay. The hollow men are post-war souls suffering in perpetual purgatory, devoid of human connection in a destroyed and spiritually emotionless world.

Core Argument

T.S. Eliot underscores individual and collective *paralysis* in modernity and urbanity, as well as an underlying, lingering isolation.

HSC Module B Framing

Under HSC Module B (Critical Study of Literature), the key concept is **textual integrity**: the organic unity of form, language, and ideas. In *The Hollow Men*, this is achieved through fragmentation, polyvocality, register shifts, and the objective correlative – all articulating the collective spiritual paralysis of the post-WWI era. The poem is a critical bridge between the urban desolation of *The Waste Land* (1922) and the religious questing of *Ash-Wednesday* (1930).

A Band 6 response must go beyond identifying themes to interrogate *how* the poem's construction "shifts the reader's internal planes," forcing a confrontation with uncomfortable truths about human existence.

HSC Key Point

Prioritise higher-order terminology: **register shifts, polyphony, the objective correlative, textual integrity**, and the poem's position within Eliot's poetic suite.

Key Concepts and Definitions

The following terms are essential to high-level analysis of *The Hollow Men*. Learn the definitions and the associated analytical move before reading the poem sections.

Term	Definition and Application
Objective Correlative Eliot, 1921	A “literary collage of evocative images”; using a cluster of images or words to evoke a specific emotion rather than stating it directly.
Cri de coeur	French: “cry from the heart.” A raw, desperate plea or expression of anguish.
Duality	Opposing forces held in tension (for example, form versus emotion, shape versus colour, hope versus despair).
Episodic free verse	The poem is divided into five numbered sections, each with its own tone and focus, with no consistent rhyme or metre. Mirrors a broken, fragmented world.
Purgatory	In Catholic theology, the in-between state after death where souls are neither in Heaven nor Hell. The hollow men are stuck here: guilty, unable to move forward.
Pathetic fallacy	Attributing human emotions to nature (for example, the wind “singing” as if trying to communicate).
Bathos	A sudden, deflating drop from something elevated or hopeful to something bleak or disappointing.
Register shift	A deliberate change in the level or tone of language within the poem, moving between sacred/liturgical and secular/conversational registers. In <i>The Hollow Men</i> , this creates polyvocality: no single stable voice, mirroring the cultural crisis of identity.
Polyvocality	The presence of multiple, often disjointed voices. The poem is not spoken by one unified speaker but a chorus of fragments, reflecting the “fractured self” of the hollow men and the collapse of coherent identity in modernity.

Textual integrity HSC term	The organic unity of form, language, and ideas. In this poem, the fragmented form <i>is</i> the meaning: the poem performs its argument through its own disintegration.
Entropy	The scientific principle that all structures move toward disorder and decay. Applied to the poem: the repetitive structures and terminal “whimper” suggest civilisation is in a state of gradual, irreversible decline.
Aboulia	A psychological term for a pathological lack of will or motivation. The hollow men’s inability to act, pray, or connect is not mere laziness but a diagnosable spiritual paralysis.

Epigraphs

Two epigraphs open the poem, each adding a layer of meaning before a single line of verse has been read.

Mistah Kurtz – he dead
...the Old Guy

Epigraph 1: “Mistah Kurtz – he dead”

This epigraph is drawn from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Kurtz is a European man in colonial Africa, held up as a symbol of Western enlightenment: intelligent, civilised, and supposedly superior. Yet he loses his mind, goes native, and sets himself up as a god-like ruler. He dies alone and empty.

Eliot uses this allusion to suggest the hollow men are Kurtz’s legacy: a civilisation that believed in its own greatness, only to find it was hollow at the core. The greatest fear is that European society, like Kurtz, will turn its back on its own history and collapse into emptiness.

Epigraph 2: “...the Old Guy”

This epigraph alludes to the English tradition of Guy Fawkes Day (5th November). Guy Fawkes, a Catholic revolutionary, was arrested in 1605 for plotting to blow up Parliament. Each year, children make **effigies** of Fawkes from straw and old clothes, carry them around asking strangers for “a penny for the Old Guy,” then burn them at night. These stuffed, fake, inhuman figures – built only to be destroyed – become Eliot’s image of the hollow men themselves: artificial, worthless, destined for the fire.

Combined reading: Kurtz and Fawkes were both “lost violent souls” – men of misguided action. The hollow men, by contrast, refuse to act at all, for good or for evil. They are the heirs of failed greatness, and more pathetic for it.

Section I – Poem Opening

Poem Text

*We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
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*

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

*Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
Remember us – if at all – not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.*

Summary

The speaker announces he belongs to a group of empty, hollow people – stuffed like scarecrows, leaning against each other, heads full of straw. Their voices are so dried-out they can barely be heard; what they say is as meaningless as wind in dead grass or rats scurrying over broken glass in a cellar. They have the outlines of people without the substance. Those who died with clean consciences and went to Heaven barely remember the hollow men at all: not as evil, just as hollow.

Annotations (Lines 1–18)

Quote	Technique	Analysis
<i>"We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men"</i>	Anaphora, Diacope, Oxymoron, Partial rhyme	The repeated "We are," combined with diacope ("men" closing line 1 and opening line 2), creates a chant-like, incantatory rhythm depicting the modern individual confined in paradoxical stasis. "Hollow" and "stuffed" form an oxymoron: you cannot be both empty and full. "Stuffed" represents society's infusion of artificial, materialistic desires onto the modern individual; yet "hollow" of any genuine spiritual fulfillment. The near-rhyme is deliberately unsatisfying. Heightened by enjambement, these lines trap the reader in the same loop the hollow men inhabit.
<i>"Leaning together / Head- piece filled with straw. Alas!"</i>	Scarecrow motif, Exclamation	The hollow men lean on each other like scarecrows: fake, inhuman, held up only by external support. "Alas!" is a rare flash of direct emotion, a brief cry of self-aware despair before the voice goes flat again. "Headpiece filled with straw" links to the Guy Fawkes effigies. Eliot metaphorically renders men as empty effigies, unable to access fulfillment because the pursuit of the material forges inauthenticity.

*"Our dried voices... / Are
quiet and meaningless /
As wind in dry grass / Or
rats' feet over broken glass
/ In our dry cellar"*

**Double simile, As-
sonance**

Two similes compare their voices to wind and to rats: both harsh, empty sounds with no warmth or meaning. The shared /a/ sound in "grass," "rats," "glass" creates a rasping, grating texture. The lack of spirituality metaphorically renders the men "quiet" and deprives them of the capacity to access emotion: they are dehumanised, their voices stripped of intelligence and feeling.

*"Shape without form,
shade without colour, /
Paralysed force, gesture
without motion;"*

**Oxymoron, Duality,
Caesura, Parallel
structure**

Four oxymoronic paired opposites stripped of their substance. The "colour" of pre-war civilisation – representing life, emotion, and purpose – is contrasted by the devoid "shade" of existence. Caesuras mid-line create internal pauses, like the men themselves: stuck, unable to complete any action. These longer, end-stopped lines signal: *this is the poem's thesis statement.*

*"Those who have crossed /
With direct eyes, to death's
other Kingdom"*

**Allusion (Dante),
Motif**

"Direct eyes" alludes to Dante's *Purgatorio*: those who died with moral clarity and went straight to Heaven. The hollow men, by contrast, cannot look anyone in the eye. They are ashamed, guilty, evasive.

*"Remember us – if at all –
not as lost / Violent souls,
but only / As the hollow
men / The stuffed men."*

**Bathos, Repetition,
Synecdoche**

They do not even get the dignity of being remembered as evil. They are remembered as nothing: just hollow. The hollow men function as a synecdoche for the fruitless modern man in a spiritual realm between Heaven and Hell. The poem closes its opening section by repeating the first two lines almost exactly, trapping the reader in the same loop.

Section II

Poem Text

*Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death's dream kingdom
These do not appear:
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.*

*Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind behaves
No nearer :
Not that final meeting
In the twilight kingdom*

Summary

The speaker refuses to look at the eyes he sees in his dreams: even in sleep, he cannot face them. In “death’s dream kingdom” (a purgatorial in-between), God’s eyes do not appear at all. Instead: broken imagery – sunlight on a ruined column, a tree swaying, voices in the wind – all faint and distant, more remote than a dying star. He wants to disguise himself as dead (rat’s coat, crowskin, scarecrow) so he can pass through undetected. A single isolated stanza closes the section: “Not that final meeting / In the twilight kingdom.”

Annotations (Lines 19–38)

Quote	Technique	Analysis
<i>"Eyes I dare not meet in dreams"</i>	Allusion (Dante), Motif	Alludes to Dante meeting Beatrice in <i>Purgatory</i> : he cannot look at her because her eyes blaze with holiness. Here the speaker cannot look for the opposite reason: shame and guilt. The eyes represent God's judgement and the gaze of his victims.
<i>"Sunlight on a broken column"</i>	Symbol, Objective Correlative	The broken column represents Western Civilisation in ruins. Columns were the defining architectural feature of Ancient Greek and Roman temples: they represent cultural achievement and order. A broken one suggests Europe's greatness is crumbling. God's light (sunlight) falls on it but cannot fix it; it only illuminates the decay.
<i>"And voices are / In the wind's singing / More distant and more solemn / Than a fading star."</i>	Pathetic fallacy, Bathos, Motif	In Section I, the hollow men's voices were "as meaningless as wind." Ironically, the <i>wind</i> now seems more human: it appears to sing. But this flicker of hope immediately deflates: the voices are "more distant than a fading star." Stars equal hope throughout the poem; a fading star equals hope dying.

"Let me also wear / Such deliberate disguises / Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves / In a field"

Cumulative listing, Objective Correlative

The hollow men want to disguise themselves as dead things to pass through undetected: too guilty to enter Heaven honestly. "Rat's coat" = disease. "Crowskin" = death (crows are carrion birds). "Crossed staves" = scarecrow posture, but also a musical pun: overlapping musical staves create discord, a metaphor for their inverted, broken existence.

"Behaving as the wind behaves / No nearer :"

Simile, Caesura

Aimless like the wind: no will of their own. The colon cuts the line off mid-sentence. The persona tries to speak and stops. Communication breaks down at the moment of attempt.

"Not that final meeting / In the twilight kingdom"

Visual poetry, Isolated stanza

This two-line stanza sits alone on the page, visually isolated, enacting the isolation it describes. "Twilight kingdom" is a liminal space: not light, not dark; not Heaven, not Hell; not alive, not dead. The stanza's physical isolation *is* its meaning.

Perspective shift to "Let me..."

Voice change

Shifts from collective "we" to individual "I/me": one hollow man steps forward to speak alone. The guilt and shame become more intimate and personal.

Section III

Poem Text

*This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.*

*Is it like this
In death's other kingdom
Waking alone
At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness
Lips that would kiss
Form prayers to broken stone.*

Summary

The landscape: a dead, barren desert full of cactus (the opposite of a fertile, life-giving garden). Stone statues are erected and the dead pray to them beneath a dying star. The speaker wonders: is it like this in Heaven, waking alone, full of tenderness but unable to act on it? The hollow men *want* to kiss, to connect, to love – but instead their lips form prayers to broken stone idols. The impulse is there; the ability to act on it is gone.

Annotations

Quote	Technique	Analysis
<i>"This is the dead land / This is cactus land"</i>	Epistrophe, Objective Correlative	The repeated "This is" creates a flat, declarative tone, like a tour guide showing someone around a wasteland. Cactus: dry, hostile, alive but only capable of causing pain. The landscape mirrors the hollow men's inner state exactly.
<i>"Here the stone images / Are raised, here they receive / The supplication of a dead man's hand / Under the twinkle of a fading star."</i>	Visual imagery, Epistrophe, Biblical allusion	The exhaustive repetition ("here...here...here") and visual imagery generate a bleak register, evoking isolation and insurmountable liminality. Alludes to Old Testament "graven images": the hollow men as modern idolaters, raised like tombstones, the living praying to the dead.
<i>"Waking alone / At the hour when we are / Trem- bling with tenderness"</i>	Oxymoron, Collective pronoun	"Waking alone" combined with the collective "we" creates an oxymoron of psychological isolation despite physical proximity to others – the alienating effect of Modernity, where individuals experience loneliness precisely within a crowd.
<i>"Lips that would kiss / Form prayers to broken stone."</i>	Irony, Bathos, Enjambment, Libidinal reading	The enjambment makes you read "Lips that would kiss / Form prayers" – a tender, even intimate image – before the bathos of "broken stone." Eliot suggests that men "stuff" themselves with libidinal pursuits (the desire to kiss, to connect) as a substitute for genuine spiritual fulfilment. Desire exists; action is impossible.

*“Under the twinkle of a
fading star.”*

**Motif, Intertextual
allusion**

Stars represent hope throughout the poem. More specifically, the “fading star” intertextually alludes to the Star of Bethlehem and the birth of Christ. That it is “fading” suggests a receding accessibility of faith for mankind.

Section IV

Poem Text

*The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid each other
On this beach of the tumid river

Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death's twilight kingdom
The hope only
Of empty men.*

Summary

God's eyes – his presence and judgement – are completely absent. The hollow men are in a valley of dying stars, surrounded by the ruins of their former civilisation. They gather at the edge of a swollen river (the mythological boundary of the underworld) but avoid each other even as they huddle together. Their only hope is the "multifoliate rose" – the Virgin Mary in Catholic tradition, who could intercede for them and restore their sight. But even this hope is qualified: it is "the hope only / Of empty men."

Annotations

Quote	Technique	Analysis
<i>"The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here"</i>	Repetition, Motif, Ironic rhyme	Total absence of God's presence equals ultimate spiritual emptiness. The repetition hammers the point. Crucially, "here"/"here" rhymes: but rhyme usually creates beauty and connection. Here it only underscores absence; the form mocks the content.
<i>"This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms"</i>	Metaphor, Symbol	A jaw is what you speak with – but it is broken. Communication is impossible. "Lost kingdoms" represents the collapse of Western Civilisation and the British Empire post-WWI. Everything that once gave these men cultural identity is rubble.
<i>"We grope together / And avoid each other"</i>	Paradox	They are physically close but spiritually and emotionally disconnected. They reach out blindly but cannot genuinely connect. Proximity without intimacy; movement without purpose.
<i>"On this beach of the tumid river"</i>	Classical allusion	The swollen ("tumid") river is the River Styx in Greek mythology: the boundary between the living world and the land of the dead. The hollow men are stuck on the bank, unable to cross. Pure purgatorial limbo.
<i>"Multifoliate rose / Of death's twilight kingdom"</i>	Religious symbol, Motif	The many-petalled rose is the traditional Catholic symbol of the Virgin Mary, who could intercede for the hollow men and restore their sight. But note: it belongs to "death's twilight kingdom," not Heaven itself. Even their best hope exists in the in-between.

*“The hope only / Of empty
men.”*

**Bathos, Ironic
rhyme**

Rhyme returns at the stanza’s end (rare in this poem). It signals hope – but the hope is immediately qualified as belonging only to “empty men.” The music is there; the substance is not.

Section V

Poem Text

*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.*

*Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom*

*Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow
Life is very long*

*Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom*

For Thine is

*Life is
For Thine is the
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

Summary

Opens with a twisted children's nursery rhyme ("Here we go round the mulberry bush") – but instead of a mulberry bush, they circle a "prickly pear" (a desert cactus) at 5am, the darkest hour. The poem then shifts to its most philosophical moment: between every pair of things that should connect (idea/reality, desire/action, emotion/response), there falls a "Shadow." The Shadow severs cause from effect, intention from outcome. Intercut with this are fragments of the Lord's Prayer ("For Thine is the Kingdom"), but the speaker cannot complete the prayer. The poem ends on the most famous lines in modern poetry: the world ends not with a dramatic bang but with a quiet, pathetic whimper.

Annotations

Quote	Technique	Analysis
<i>"Here we go round the prickly pear / At five o'clock in the morning."</i>	Dark parody, Allusion, Irony	Parodies "Here we go round the mulberry bush" – a cheerful children's song about morning routines. Replacing the bush with a "prickly pear" (barren, hostile cactus) turns a symbol of childhood innocence into one of sterility and pain. 5am is the darkest hour, just before dawn: the hollow men are perpetually stuck at the moment before any light arrives.
<i>"Between the idea / And the reality... / Falls the Shadow"</i>	Anaphora, Motif (the Shadow)	The Shadow is the poem's central symbol. It falls between every pair of things that should connect: thought and action, desire and fulfilment, emotion and response. It is the force that paralyses the hollow men. The anaphoric "Between..." builds relentlessly, each repetition deepening the sense of entrapment.
<i>"For Thine is the Kingdom"</i> (italicised, indented)	Secondary speaker, Visual poetry, Biblical allusion	A fragment of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:13). It appears in italics and is indented, signalling a different voice. Someone connected to God enters briefly and quotes scripture correctly. The hollow men, by contrast, cannot.
<i>"For Thine is / Life is / For Thine is the"</i>	Fragmented syntax, Truncation, Syntactical irregularity	The Lord's Prayer disintegrates in real time. The hollow men try to pray but the Shadow intervenes. "Life is very long" (from Conrad) intrudes instead: the exhaustion of endless, purposeless survival replacing the prayer. Grammar, theology, the men – all broken.

*"This is the way the world
ends / ×3 / Not with a
bang but a whimper."*

Anaphora, Bathetic juxtaposition, Ironic declaration

Triple repetition builds momentum – then completely deflates it. The bathetic juxtaposition superimposes the apocalypse with a “petering end” rather than a climactic reckoning: a direct subversion of the cataclysmic imagery of the Book of Revelation. “A bang” = drama, consequence, meaning. “A whimper” = small, pathetic, barely audible. Entropy made audible.

*"Between the desire / And
the spasm / Between the
potency / And the ex-
istence / Between the
essence / And the descent"*

Anaphora, Enumeration

The listing intensifies and becomes more physical (“spasm,” “potency”) before turning abstract again (“essence,” “descent”). Eliot maps every stage at which human intention is cut off: desire never becomes release, power never becomes existence, the ideal never becomes real. Everything collapses into the Shadow before it can become anything.

Line-by-Line Analysis of Key Passages

Lines 24–28: “There, is a... / ...a fading star.”

The speaker describes “death’s dream kingdom” – the underworld/purgatory. It is an uncanny space: trees “swing” in the wind, and the wind itself sounds “distant and solemn.” The wind almost seems human here, as if it is trying to say something (**pathetic fallacy**). This is a direct inversion of Section I: there, the hollow men’s voices were “as meaningless as the wind.” Now the *wind* has more human texture than they do.

Any warmth immediately collapses. The voices are “more distant and more solemn / Than a fading star.” Stars are symbols of hope throughout the poem – and this one is **fading**. The brief flicker of musicality (the lines vary in length, oscillating like the swinging tree) demonstrates the form mirroring the content: something almost beautiful, then gone.

HSC Key Point

The line lengths vary to mirror the “swinging” of the tree: the poem’s form enacts the imagery it describes. This is textual integrity in action.

Lines 29–38: “Let me be no nearer... / ...No nearer :”

The speaker shifts from observing to expressing desire. He wants to stay as far as possible from the “eyes” of judgement. He introduces three “deliberate disguises”:

- **Rat’s coat:** rats carry disease. His despair is a contagion.
- **Crowskin:** crows are carrion birds, symbols of death. He presents himself as dead.
- **Crossed staves / In a field:** scarecrow posture. Also a musical pun – crossed staves create discord, mirroring their inverted, broken existence. Alludes again to Guy Fawkes effigies.

The alliterative hard /k/ in “coat” and “crowskin” links the symbols: disease leads to death. He then compares himself to the wind via simile: aimless, no will of his own. He wants to sink into his hollowness and stay there.

Form note

Lines 29 and 31 are enjambed; 30 and 32 are end-stopped – a brief moment of formal regularity that disappears by lines 33–38, which become jagged and irregular. The formal order builds as he articulates his desires, then collapses as he describes what he would actually wear. The poem itself is decaying as it is written.

Lines 39–44: “This is the dead land... / ...a fading star.”

Section III opens with the poem’s setting made fully explicit: a desert, a dead land, full of cactus. This is not a literal desert: it is an extended metaphor for post-WWI Europe, culturally dead, spiritually barren, and hostile to the touch.

The repetitive, end-stopped opening lines echo the poem’s opening (“We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men”), encouraging the reader to see the hollow men and their landscape as one. They have shaped their environment; it reflects their inner condition. Stone statues are erected and the dead pray to them – a direct Biblical allusion to the Israelites worshipping graven images (false idols) instead of God.

Lines 45–51: “Is it like this... / ...to broken stone.”

The speaker wonders whether Heaven is like this too: whether people there also wake alone, full of tenderness they cannot act on. In purgatory, intimacy is impossible. They are “trembling with tenderness,” lips ready to kiss – but instead of kissing, those lips only “form prayers to broken stone.”

The enjambment on “Lips that would kiss / Form prayers” is devastating. You read the tender image first, then the bathos hits: *broken stone*. They are not kissing stone by choice – they *cannot* kiss. The hollowness extends to their relationships.

Consonance note

The shared /r/ sound in “form prayers” and “broken” links them: the prayers are as broken as the stone. Both are equally hopeless.

Lines 52–56: “The eyes are not here... / ...our lost kingdoms.”

Section IV returns to the central symbol: eyes. As established via the Dante allusion, eyes equal God’s presence, holiness, purity, and judgement. Here, they are completely absent.

The repetitive opening (“The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here”) echoes the poem’s first lines – the speaker is **obsessing**, stuck on the same idea. The landscape is described in three escalating images:

1. **“Valley of dying stars”**: stars equal hope; they are dying here.
2. **“Hollow valley”**: the word “hollow” has only been used to describe the men before. Now it describes the *landscape*. The men and their world are indistinguishable.
3. **“Broken jaw of our lost kingdoms”**: a jaw is what you speak with, but it is broken. Civilisation was once magnificent; now only the bones remain.

Lines 57–60: “In this last... / ...the tumid river.”

The hollow men spend their time in “this last of meeting places.” They “grope together” (blind, blundering) but “avoid each other”: physical proximity with zero genuine connection. The paradox is the heart of their isolation.

They stand on “the beach of the tumid river.” Allusion to Dante’s *Inferno*: the souls of the dead gather on the shores of the River Acheron, which surrounds Hell. The fact that the hollow men have not crossed it matters: they are not in Hell (not evil enough) but not in Heaven either. They are neutrals, stuck in between – which is the worst fate of all, because they will never move.

The hollow men are an **extended metaphor** for the shattered, disillusioned generation that fought and survived World War I: people who should be preserving European culture, but are instead the agents of its failure.

Lines 61–67: “Sightless, unless... / ...Of empty men.”

The speaker has spent the section establishing total spiritual absence. Now, briefly, a caesura: “Sightless, unless.” The pause fills the reader with suspense. *Unless what?*

The conditions for regaining sight: the eyes must “reappear / As the perpetual star / Multifoliate rose.” That hope is the multifoliate rose: the Virgin Mary in Catholic tradition, who holds the key to renewing their relationship with God. But the final lines immediately deflate this: “The hope only / Of empty men.” The hope exists – but it belongs *only* to people desperate enough to be called empty. It is a last resort, a fantasy, not a realistic prospect.

Lines 68–71: “Here we go... / ...in the morning.” (Section V opening)

Section V opens in italics, signalling these lines are **sung**, not spoken. The hollow men have broken into song. But it is a deranged version of a traditional children’s song: “Here we go round the mulberry bush” becomes “Here we go round the prickly pear.”

A mulberry bush is lush and productive; a prickly pear cactus is the signature plant of the dead, hostile desert described throughout. The sweet, innocent children’s song is invaded by the poem’s own bleakness. “Five o’clock in the morning” is the darkest hour before dawn: the hollow men are permanently stuck at the moment just before any light arrives.

The repetition of “prickly pear” is **epizeuxis** (immediate repetition of a word for emphasis): it underscores something childish, even infantile, about the hollow men. Harsh alliterative and consonant /p/, /r/, /k/ sounds run through the stanza, as sharp and cutting as the cactus itself.

Lines 72–77: “Between the idea... / ...is the Kingdom”

After the nursery rhyme, the poem takes a sharp turn. The speaker describes the **Shadow**. It is never directly defined. Instead, Eliot describes what it *does*: it falls between “the idea / And the reality” and between “the motion / And the act.” It prevents ideas from becoming real and desires from becoming actions. In a sense, the Shadow *is* the hollow men’s condition.

The stanza ends with an italicised, indented line: “For Thine is the Kingdom.” This is a different voice – someone who knows the Bible and can quote it directly (Matthew 6:13). The hollow men cannot quote scripture; this new voice can. It enters as a quiet re-

buttal to the Shadow's power: *God has more power than the Shadow does*. But the speaker cannot hold onto this.

Lines 84–91: “Between the desire... / ...is the Kingdom”

The third and longest “Between...” stanza intensifies. The Shadow now falls between “desire / And the spasm”: sexual desire and fulfilment. Then between “potency / And the existence”: the potential for something, stopped from ever becoming real. Finally, between “essence / And the descent.”

“Essence” in philosophy is the fundamental truth of something: the real thing from which all copies descend. The Shadow cuts off the “essence” before it can “descend” into reality. The Shadow operates at every level: the personal (desire), the creative (conception), and now the philosophical (essence). It is not just a human problem – it is woven into the structure of reality.

Lines 92–94: “For Thine is... / ...Thine is the”

The speaker tries to repeat the things he has heard from the other voice. He fails completely. “For Thine is the Kingdom” becomes “For Thine is.” “Life is very long” becomes “Life is.” He tries one more time: “For Thine is the.”

These abbreviated, broken lines are the poem's starkest image of disconnection from God. The other voice can quote scripture fluently; the hollow men cannot even finish a sentence. Instead of drawing them closer to God, these failed attempts only reveal how far away they are.

Lines 95–98: “This is the way the world ends / ...but a whimper.” (Final lines)

The poem's final four lines are in italics: it is ambiguous whether the speaker is singing, or the other voice has returned, or both are speaking at once. The ambiguity is deliberate: at the end, all voices merge into one bleak prophecy.

“This is the way the world ends” is repeated three times (**tricolon** and **anaphora**), building momentum. Then the deflation: “Not with a bang but a whimper.”

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- “**A bang**”: drama, consequence, meaning. An ending worthy of history.
 - “**A whimper**”: small, pathetic, barely audible. The world – and European civilisation – does not end heroically. It just quietly fades into nothing, like the hollow men themselves.

HSC Key Point

All four lines are **end-stopped**: for the first time in the poem, every line closes definitively. The end-stops enact the apocalypse, doors closing one by one with finality. The form achieves closure only at the moment of total collapse.

Theme Tables

Theme 1: Isolation

Quote	Technique	Analysis
<i>"Let me also wear / Such deliberate disguises / Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves / In a field"</i>	Cumulative listing (Objective Correlative)	The hollow men masquerade as dead things to pass undetected – too guilty to enter Heaven honestly. "Crossed staves" = double entendre (scarecrow posture and musical discord).
<i>"This is the dead land / This is cactus land..."</i>	Objective Correlative, Epistrophe	Death imagery generates a bleak register, evoking isolation through the simulacra of a desolate desert. The landscape has taken on the hollow men's characteristics: it is as empty as they are.
<i>"We grope together / And avoid each other"</i>	Paradox	Physical proximity with spiritual and emotional distance: the essence of the hollow men's isolation. They cannot even connect with each other.

Theme 2: Spiritual and Social Decay

Quote	Technique	Analysis
<i>"For Thine is / Life is / For Thine is the"</i>	Religious allusion, Tortured syntax, Enjambment	The Lord's Prayer disintegrates: the hollow men cannot complete it. The Shadow severs them from God at the moment of supplication. Eliot interweaves "fragments that flow and melt into each other continuously" (Koo, 2021).
<i>"Sunlight on a broken column"</i>	Symbol, Objective Correlative	The broken column represents Western Civilisation in ruins. God's light falls on the rubble but cannot restore it. Post-WWI Europe: glorious past, shattered present.
<i>"Lips that would kiss / Form prayers to broken stone."</i>	Irony, Bathos, Biblical allusion	The hollow men cannot love, cannot connect – only mouth hollow prayers to false idols, just as the Israelites turned from God to graven images. Tenderness is present; the capacity to act on it is gone.

Theme 3: Paralysis (Purgatorial) and Hope (Heaven)

Quote	Technique	Analysis
<i>"death's other Kingdom"</i>	Motif	Alludes to Heaven. Unable to utter it directly = unworthiness due to guilt. Abstract language for what they cannot claim.
<i>"Between the idea... / Between the motion... / Between the conception..."</i>	Anaphora, Enjambement, Enumeration	The Shadow falls between every intention and action, trapping the hollow men in permanent paralysis. The spiralling list enacts the endlessness of their purgatorial state.
<i>"Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion;"</i>	Iambic pentameter (ironic), Duality	Ordered metre ironically contains fractured content. Four paired opposites describe existence without substance.
<i>"The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here... / Sightless, unless / The eyes reappear"</i>	Motif, Repetition, Ironic musicality	God's eyes are completely absent. Rhyme signals hope – but immediately qualified ("sightless, unless"). Hope given and revoked in the same breath.
<i>"Not with a bang but a whimper."</i>	Bathos, Anticlimax	The ultimate statement of the hollow men's paralysis. They cannot even end dramatically. They simply fade out.

Themes: Extended Notes

Emptiness and Cultural Decay

The hollowness of the men is not literal: it is an **extended metaphor** for the decay of European society and culture after WWI. The war shook people's faith in European progress and left behind a generation of survivors who felt empty, purposeless, and guilty.

Key evidence:

- Their voices are "dried": no longer carrying emotion or intelligence, just meaningless noise.
- "Rat's coat" and "crowskin" are symbols of disease and death. Their despair is *contagious*, spreading from person to person like a plague.
- "Form prayers to broken stone" – replaced real faith with hollow ritual and false idols.
- The landscape mirrors them: hollow valley, desert full of cactus, a broken jaw. The environment has taken on their characteristics.
- "Broken column" = Western Civilisation in architectural ruin. Europe's cultural past is crumbling; its people are too empty to rebuild it.

Eliot's judgement on post-WWI Europe: the culture is in decline, and the people who should preserve it are ineffectual, empty, and even dangerous to their own societies.

Faith and Faithlessness

Religion runs beneath every line of the poem. The hollow men have lost their connection to God, and this loss is the root of all their other failures.

Key evidence:

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- **Section III:** They pray to “stone images” – false idols. Echoes the Old Testament Israelites turning from God to graven images.
 - **Section IV:** Their only hope is the “multifoliate rose” (the Virgin Mary in Catholicism), who could intercede for them and restore their sight. But even this hope is framed as belonging only to “empty men.”
 - **Section V:** The Lord’s Prayer fragments mid-sentence. A secondary voice (connected to God) can quote the Bible correctly; the hollow men cannot. The Shadow physically prevents them from completing the prayer.
 - **The Shadow:** the symbol of this spiritual failure: the gap between intention and action, between the soul and God.

Crucially, the resources for restoration exist (the Virgin Mary, the Lord’s Prayer, God’s kingdom) – but the hollow men cannot access them. Their spiritual intimacy with God is permanently lost within the world of this poem.

Symbols and Motifs

Straw

Appears: Line 4

Straw is proverbially worthless: cheap, hollow, something animals eat. To have a head “stuffed with straw” means the hollow men have nothing of value in their minds: their thoughts are empty, useless, and worthless. Straw is also the material children in England used to build Guy Fawkes effigies – stuffed figures constructed only to be burned. The hollow men are those effigies: fake, inhuman, destined for the fire.

Wind

Appears: Lines 8, 26, 35

In Section I, the hollow men’s voices are compared to wind: both are “quiet and meaningless,” devoid of human intelligence. This is a disturbing inversion: the human voice is supposed to carry ideas, emotion, and meaning. Theirs has become as empty as the wind itself. The symbol recurs in Sections II and III, where Eliot uses it again to underline the emptiness of the hollow men’s world – and, ironically, the wind seems to “sing” with more humanity than they do, deepening the shame of their condition.

Eyes

Appears: Lines 14, 19, 22, 52, 53, 62

Eyes are the poem’s most persistent and complex symbol. They represent God’s presence, judgement, and the ability to perceive truth. Those who went to Heaven walked there “with direct eyes” – willing to look honestly at themselves and embrace judgement. The hollow men refuse: they “dare not meet” the eyes even in dreams, avoiding the truth of who they are.

In “death’s dream kingdom,” the eyes lose their power: reduced to “sunlight on a broken column,” illuminating decay but unable to fix it. God is present but diminished. By Section IV, the eyes are gone entirely (“The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here”) – total spiritual abandonment. The hollow men are “sightless”: cut off from God, from truth, from judgement, and from themselves.

Broken Column

Appears: Line 23

The broken column is a layered symbol. Columns were the defining architectural feature of Ancient Greek and Roman temples – the physical embodiment of Western Civilisation’s cultural greatness. A broken column, then, is Western Civilisation in ruins. In the poem, it appears with “sunlight” on it: God’s light falls on the decay, but only illuminates it – it cannot restore it. God, as “sunlight on a broken column,” is present in the underworld but powerless to stop the decline of the culture the hollow men represent.

Rat’s Coat

Appears: Line 33

Rats carry disease and spread it to human communities. By wearing a “rat’s coat,” the speaker presents himself as a carrier of illness: a danger to those around him. This is not malice; it is contagion. His despair is a plague that passes from person to person. The hollow man understands himself as toxic: his spiritual condition is infectious, spreading hollowness through the population around him.

Crowskin

Appears: Line 33

Crows are a traditional symbol of death. Where the rat’s coat marks the speaker as a carrier of disease, the crowskin goes further: he becomes a symbol of death itself. Together with “rat’s coat,” the alliterative hard /k/ sound links the two – disease leads to death. The disguises are not separate costumes; they are stages of the same condition, escalating from sickness to mortality.

Crossed Staves

Appears: Line 33

The “crossed staves” complete the three disguises. Staves are sticks or wooden poles – the frame of a scarecrow, or the stuffing of a Guy Fawkes effigy. Where “rat’s coat” and “crow’skin” present the hollow men as dangerous to others, the crossed staves reframe them as *pathetic*: they are just scarecrows, built by children and designed to be burned. Not truly threatening – just fake and hollow. The symbol also functions as a musical pun: crossed musical staves create discord, an inversion of harmony, mirroring the hollow men’s inverted, broken existence.

Stars

Appears: Lines 28, 44, 63

Stars are used consistently as symbols of hope and redemption throughout the poem. In each appearance, the star is “fading” or qualified – a promise of hope that is actively disappearing from the world the hollow men inhabit. The one exception is the “perpetual star” in Section IV, which represents the Virgin Mary’s intercession: a hope that could sustain itself. But even this is immediately labelled “the hope only / Of empty men.” Stars are there to show that hope exists – and that it is fading fast.

Tumid River

Appears: Line 60

“Tumid” means swollen or overflowing. A flooding river in an otherwise dry desert landscape is deliberately surprising and ominous. Symbolically, the tumid river alludes to the River Acheron in Dante’s *Inferno*: the boundary of Hell. That the hollow men stand on its beach (not having crossed it) confirms their purgatorial status: not evil enough for Hell, not good enough for Heaven. As a cultural symbol, the swollen river represents the barely-contained violent energy of post-WWI Europe – a society that has not disappeared, but could flood and cause catastrophic damage at any moment.

Multifoliate Rose

Appears: Line 64

The multifoliate (many-petalled) rose is a traditional Catholic symbol of the Virgin Mary – sometimes called the “mystic rose.” In the poem it represents the hollow men’s only realistic path back to God: through the Virgin Mary’s intercession, their sight (their connection to God) might be restored. But the speaker frames this as “the hope only / Of empty men” – a last resort, an almost impossible dream. The rose exists in “death’s twilight kingdom,” not in Heaven itself: even the best hope available to the hollow men belongs to the in-between.

The Shadow

Appears: Lines 76, 82, 90

The Shadow is the poem’s most powerful and abstract symbol. The speaker never defines it directly: instead, he describes what it *does*. It “falls” between every pair of things that should naturally connect: idea and reality, motion and act, desire and fulfilment, conception and creation. It severs cause from effect, intention from outcome, emotion from response. It is the force that paralyses the hollow men completely: not active evil, but a pervasive spiritual numbness or anxiety that stops everything from working. The Shadow may symbolise fear, death, or the absence of God. Ultimately, it is the name for whatever it is that keeps the hollow men hollow.

Poetic Devices

End-Stopped Lines

The Hollow Men uses end-stops **unpredictably and irregularly** – which is itself the point. In a normal poem, a regular pattern of end-stops gives a sense of order and control. Here, there is no such pattern. The poem often runs for long stretches of pure enjambment before suddenly landing on a hard stop – which, when it arrives, feels almost apocalyptic, like a door slamming shut.

The final four lines (95–98) are all end-stopped: the only moment in the poem where every line closes definitively. This formal finality enacts the apocalypse the lines describe.

HSC Key Point

Key pattern: The poem alternates between long enjambed runs and sudden end-stops, keeping the reader permanently off-balance – unable to settle into a rhythm, just like the hollow men.

Caesura

Because the poem uses short lines (mostly 4–6 syllables), caesuras are rare. When one does appear, it carries exceptional weight.

The most important caesura is in **line 61**: “Sightless, unless.” The comma splits the line into two halves – “sightless” (despair) and “unless” (hope). The pause holds both possibilities in suspension simultaneously. The caesura makes the reader feel the tension between the hollow men’s complete spiritual blindness and the faint, fragile possibility of recovery.

Lines 11–12 also feature caesuras: “Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion;” – the mid-line pauses emphasise the parallelism, guiding the reader through each description one by one.

Alliteration

Eliot uses alliteration not for beauty but for **emphasis and sonic atmosphere**: to make the bleak world of the poem *sound* as hostile as it feels.

- **Line 33 – /k/ sound:** “Rat’s coat, crowskin, crossed staves.” The hard /k/ alliteration binds the three disguises together. The sound is sharp and percussive – as cutting as the symbols themselves.
- **Lines 68–71 – /p/, /r/, /k/ sounds:** “Prickly pear / Prickly pear prickly pear.” These sounds are percussive and sharp – as harsh and unwelcoming as the cactus they describe.

Assonance

Assonance is used to **link images thematically** and to create sonic discomfort that mirrors the hollow men’s condition.

- **Lines 8–9 – /a/ sound:** “As wind in dry grass / Or rats’ feet over broken glass.” The shared /a/ sound is harsh and grating, binding the two similes together.
- **Lines 64 and 66 – /o/ sound:** “Multifoliate rose... The hope only.” The assonance links “rose” and “hope” – both connected to salvation – before pulling the reader into the deflating qualification.

Consonance

- **Line 51 – /r/ sound:** “Form prayers to broken stone.” The repeated /r/ links “form,” “prayers,” and “broken”: the prayers themselves are as broken as the stone they are directed at.
- **Lines 68–71 – /k/ sound:** The consonant /k/ in “prickly,” “pear” runs through the nursery rhyme alongside the /p/ alliteration. Sharp, cutting, and unwelcoming.

Repetition (Anaphora, Diacope, Parallelism)

Repetition is arguably the poem’s most pervasive structural device.

Anaphora (repeated opening phrases): “We are the...” (lines 1–2), “Between the...” (Section V), “This is the...” (lines 39–40, 95–97). Each creates a cumulative, incantatory effect. The “Between...” anaphora is especially powerful: three full stanzas built on the same structure, each adding to the sense that the Shadow’s reach is unlimited.

Diacope (repetition of a word after intervening text): “men” at the end of line 1 and start of line 2; “dream” in lines 19–20; “There” in lines 22 and 24; “Let me” in lines 29 and 31. This creates a looping, obsessive quality.

Parallelism (lines built on the same grammatical structure): lines 11–12 (“Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion;”). The four parallel phrases are each a different way of saying the same thing.

HSC Key Point

Repetition map (key instances): Lines 1–2, 17–18 (“the hollow men / The stuffed men”); Lines 11–12 (“Shape without form...”); Lines 19–20 (“dreams / dream”); Lines 39–40 (“This is the dead land / This is cactus land”); Lines 52–55 (“The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here”); Lines 68–71 (prickly pear song); Lines 72–76, 78–82, 84–90 (“Between... / Falls the Shadow”); Lines 77, 91 (“For Thine is the Kingdom”); Lines 92–94 (garbled prayer fragments); Lines 95–97 (“This is the way the world ends” ×3).

Simile

Eliot uses simile to underline one of the poem’s central ideas: the hollow men have **lost their humanity**.

- **Lines 5–10:** Voices compared to “wind in dry grass” and “rats’ feet over broken glass.” Both similes link the hollow men to inhuman things.
- **Lines 34–35:** The speaker dressed as a scarecrow, “behaving as the wind behaves.” To move like the wind is to move without intelligence, intention, or purpose.
- **Lines 61–63:** “Sightless, unless / The eyes reappear / As the perpetual star.” The simile links sight (God’s connection) to a star – a symbol of hope that could, in theory, be perpetual.

Metaphor

The poem is built on metaphor at every level – from individual images to the entire poem as a sustained metaphorical system.

Core metaphors:

- “Hollow men” / “stuffed men” – not literally hollow; metaphor for lives emptied of joy, substance, and meaning.
- “Dried voices” – voices as something organic that has withered and died.
- “Death’s dream kingdom,” “twilight kingdom,” “death’s other Kingdom” – the underworld/purgatory never named directly.
- “Broken jaw of our lost kingdoms” – the valley as a dead creature; civilisation as a carcass.

Extended Metaphor

Two extended metaphors run through the entire poem:

1. The hollow men as WWI survivors. The hollow men are a sustained metaphor for the shattered generation that fought and survived the First World War: people who came home physically alive but spiritually broken. The “emptiness” and “paralysis” they experience is Eliot’s way of capturing the psychological devastation that many veterans lived with but could not articulate.

2. The landscape as European cultural decay. The desert – the dead land, cactus land, hollow valley, broken jaw – is a sustained metaphor for the state of European civilisation after WWI. Europe was once a “grand, majestic culture” (represented by the intact column, the living kingdoms). Now it is ruins.

These two extended metaphors work together: the people and the landscape are both hollow, and neither can restore the other. The hollow men are responsible for maintaining the cultural “column” – and they have not been.

Allusion

The poem is composed almost entirely of allusions: fragments of other texts layered on top of each other. This is itself a formal statement – the poem looks like a **junk-heap of European literature**, its scattered pieces suggesting a culture reduced to tatters and scraps.

Allusion	Where	Function
Conrad's <i>Heart of Darkness</i>	Epigraph	Kurtz = European society in decline; the hollow men are his heirs.
Guy Fawkes Day	Epigraph	Straw effigies built to be burned = fake, inhuman figures.
Dante's <i>Purgatory</i> and <i>Paradise</i> (Beatrice's eyes)	Lines 19–20	Eyes = God's holiness, purity, truth; the hollow men cannot face this.
Dante's <i>Inferno</i> (River Acheron)	Line 60	The tumid river = Hell's border; the hollow men are stuck on its bank.
Children's song ("Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush")	Lines 68–71	Innocence darkly inverted; infantile state of the hollow men.
Bible, Matthew 6:13 (Lord's Prayer)	Line 77	The secondary voice can quote God; the hollow men cannot complete it.
Conrad's <i>An Outcast of the Islands</i> ("Life is very long")	Line 83	Compassion for the hollow men's exhaustion; collective cultural stakes.

Intertextual Connections

Source	Connection
Joseph Conrad, <i>Heart of Darkness</i>	Epigraph: "Mistah Kurtz – he dead." Kurtz = hollow European idealism; the hollow men are his legacy. Crucially, Kurtz and Fawkes were "lost violent souls" – men of misguided <i>action</i> . The hollow men refuse to act at all, for good or evil.
Dante, <i>Purgatorio</i> / <i>Paradiso</i>	"Eyes I dare not meet" alludes to Dante and Beatrice. Eyes = divine judgement, beauty, and truth. The hollow men cannot look.
Dante, <i>Inferno</i> III (the <i>ignavi</i>)	The hollow men parallel the <i>ignavi</i> – souls who refused to choose between good and evil and were expelled from both Heaven and Hell, trapped in barren cyclicity.
Dante, <i>Paradiso</i> (multifoliate rose)	In <i>Paradiso</i> , the multifoliate rose is the symbol of Heaven where the souls of the blessed reside. Eliot inverts it: in the poem, it exists only in "death's twilight kingdom."
The Bible (Matthew 6:13)	Lord's Prayer: "For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever, Amen." The hollow men cannot complete it.
Old Testament (Exodus / Deuteronomy)	"Stone images" / "graven images" – the hollow men as backsliding Israelites, worshipping false idols.
Shakespeare, <i>Julius Caesar</i>	"Falls the Shadow" echoes Brutus's paralysis before the assassination: the state of "insurrection" where the mind suffers but cannot execute.
Shakespeare, <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	"Lips that would kiss / Form prayers to broken stone" echoes the paradoxical nature of religious love in <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> . The impulses of love are frozen by the shadow of fear.
The Bible (Judges – Samson)	"Broken jaw of our lost kingdoms" alludes to Samson, whose jaw-bone was an instrument of divine power and courage. The hollow men's broken jaw contrasts their cowardice with Samson's spiritual wholeness.
Guy Fawkes Day (English tradition)	Epigraph: "the Old Guy" – straw effigies built to be burned. The hollow men as fake, inhuman, destined for destruction.

Greek mythology (River Styx / Acheron)	“Beach of the tumid river” – the hollow men stuck on the bank of the mythological border of Hell.
Catholic tradition	“Multifoliate rose” = the Virgin Mary. The only possible intercessor for the hollow men.
Children’s song (“Here we go round the mulberry bush”)	Dark parody in Section V. “Five o’clock in the morning” is the traditional hour of Christ’s resurrection, here transformed into a time of puerile, absurd ritual.
Joseph Conrad, <i>An Outcast of the Islands</i>	“Life is very long” (Line 83) – a compassionate secondary voice acknowledging the hollow men’s suffering.

Form, Metre and Rhyme

Form: Why It Matters

The Hollow Men is written in **free verse** – no fixed metre, no regular rhyme scheme – and broken into five sections differentiated by Roman numerals. Its stanzas vary wildly in length: some as short as two lines, some as long as ten.

This is not laziness or accident. In a poem about the collapse of European culture, **the refusal to follow traditional poetic forms is itself a statement**. The sonnet, the sestina, the ode – these forms are deeply associated with the prestige and achievement of European literary tradition. Eliot's deliberate rejection of these forms is one more "broken column" in the poem: the poem becomes evidence of the very cultural decay it describes.

HSC Key Point

Key idea for HSC: The poem's form *enacts* its content. The hollow men are "gesture without motion" – and the poem is form without pattern, almost but never quite organised.

Metre: Chaos by Design

Because the poem is in free verse, it has no consistent metre. Eliot makes this inconsistency *feel* meaningful rather than random.

The shortest lines in certain passages have only three syllables (for example, "Waking alone"). This could theoretically be read as iambic dimeter – but only if you ignore the opening stressed syllable. The metre changes completely in the very next line. The reader cannot extract a pattern because there is not one.

The metre models the chaos and emptiness the poem describes. Like the "broken stones" the hollow men pray to, the poem's metre is "gesture without motion" – it goes through the motions of being a poem without ever being fully one.

Rhyme Scheme: Hope That Keeps Disappearing

The poem has no regular rhyme scheme. Instead, rhyme **appears in bursts and then vanishes** – which is one of the poem’s most important structural decisions.

When rhyme appears, it creates a brief sense of order, musicality, and hope: the reader feels the poem *almost* becoming something beautiful and controlled. Then the rhyme disappears without warning, and the sense of hope collapses with it. This mirrors the poem’s central emotional rhythm: hope offered and immediately withdrawn.

Key examples:

- **Lines 7–8:** “meaningless” / “grass” – slant rhyme, weak but present. The poem flirts with form.
- **Lines 78–80:** “conception” / “creation” / “emotion” – these three rhyme strongly (all on the same suffix), creating genuine momentum. Then line 81 (“And the response”) and 82 (“Falls the Shadow”) break the pattern entirely.
- **Section IV ending:** “star” / “rose” / “kingdom” / “men” – no consistent rhyme; the stanza refuses resolution.
- **Final lines (95–98):** All end-stopped, no rhyme. The world ends without even the consolation of music.

Slant rhyme is particularly important. “Meaningless” and “grass” (lines 7–8) rhyme imperfectly – they sound like they should rhyme but do not quite. This is the sonic equivalent of the hollow men’s existence: almost human, almost meaningful, but not quite.

HSC Key Point

HSC key point: Eliot’s rhyme scheme is a formal enactment of the poem’s theme. Rhyme = hope, order, connection. Its disappearance = the hollow men’s inability to complete anything they start.

Form and Structure Summary

Feature	Effect
Mostly free verse	Disrupts musical conventions; mirrors fragmented post-war psyche. The poem <i>feels</i> like it should have a pattern – it almost does, then does not.
Episodic structure (5 numbered sections)	Each section has its own mood, voice, and setting. The disjointedness mirrors the fragmented consciousness of the hollow men.
Shifting line lengths	The reader can never find a comfortable rhythm – just like the hollow men can never find peace.
Fragmented / truncated lines	Grammar breaks down (especially in the Lord’s Prayer passage). The form enacts the content: the poem is as broken as the men it describes.
Indentation / visual spacing	Certain stanzas are physically isolated on the page – their separateness <i>is</i> the meaning (for example, “Not that final meeting”).
Iambic pentameter (selective)	Ironic: ordered metre within a fractured poem. The “Between...” stanzas are measured and regular yet describe pure paralysis.
Enjambment	Lines flow into each other unexpectedly; meaning shifts mid-sentence. Mimics the endless, unresolved quality of purgatorial existence.
Partial / disrupted rhyme	Glimpses of hope (Romantic form) immediately undercut. When full rhyme appears, it is ironic or bathetic.
Nursery rhyme (Section V)	A cheerful children’s song in a poem about civilisational collapse is deeply unsettling. The sing-song rhythm makes the bleakness worse.
Register shifts	The poem moves between sacred/liturgical language and conversational or childlike registers. These shifts are deliberate polyvocality. No single stable voice exists.
Polyvocality	Multiple voices inhabit the poem: the collective “we,” the individual “I,” the secondary italicised voice in Section V. The fragmentation reflects the “fractured self” of characters incapable of sustaining “coherent thought or authentic identity.”

The Secondary Voice: Form and Typography

In Section V, a secondary voice enters the poem. It is marked by two formal features:

1. **Italics** – indicating it is sung, or spoken differently.
2. **Indentation to the right margin** – physically separating it from the speaker's voice.

This voice quotes directly from the Bible (Matthew 6:13) and from Conrad's *An Outcast of the Islands*. It is capable of fluid, accurate quotation, suggesting an intimate relationship with God and with literature. The hollow men cannot achieve this intimacy. When the speaker tries to repeat the quotes in lines 92–94, he produces only garbled fragments.

The typography is the argument: the secondary voice *looks* different on the page because it *is* different – it exists in a different relationship to God, to language, and to truth.

Speaker and Setting

The Speaker

The speaker is part of a group of exhausted, defeated people – “the hollow men.” He speaks for the group, describes their condition, and occasionally speaks as an individual (“Let me...”). He never tells us who they are concretely: how many, where they came from, what they did before arriving in this bleak desert underworld. Their past has been cut away. All they have is the emptiness they inhabit now.

Key characteristics of the speaker:

- He is **self-aware** about his hollowness – he knows he is empty, worthless, a scarecrow. This self-awareness makes his condition worse, not better.
- He is **not evil** – he identifies himself as “not lost violent souls.” He is a neutral, a bystander, someone who failed to act. This is almost more disturbing than villainy.
- He is **contagious** – his despair spreads. The rat’s coat and crowskin signal he is a danger to those around him, not through malice but through proximity.
- He is **obsessive** – he keeps circling back to the same images (the eyes, the star, the voice) and the same self-descriptions. The repetition reveals a mind stuck in its own loops.
- He is **spiritually severed** – he can hear the secondary voice quoting the Bible; he knows what he *should* be able to say. But the Shadow cuts him off every time he tries.

The Secondary Voice (Section V)

A different speaker enters in italics. This voice can quote God’s scripture fluently and quotes Conrad compassionately. It may be God himself, or an angel, or simply the part of the speaker’s mind that still has access to faith – but whatever it is, it is separate from

the hollow man, and he cannot sustain it. By lines 92–94, even this voice dissolves into fragments.

Setting

The poem’s setting shifts across its five sections, but is consistently described as some version of **the underworld** – Hell, purgatory, or a state in between.

Section	Setting Name	Key Features
II	“death’s dream kingdom”	Where the eyes (God’s judgement) do not appear; tree swinging, fading star.
II	“the twilight kingdom”	Liminal space; not dark, not light; where the hollow men do not want their “final meeting.”
III	“death’s other kingdom”	Possibly Heaven – the speaker wonders if it is like this there too.
III	“the dead land” / “cactus land”	A desert; dry, hostile, barren; full of stone images (false idols).
IV	“this hollow valley”	The setting shares the same word as the hollow men – it reflects their condition.
IV	“the beach of the tumid river”	The bank of a swollen river; purgatorial limbo (allusion to Dante’s Acheron).

The setting is simultaneously **literal** (a version of Hell) and **metaphorical** (post-WWI Europe) – both readings are essential to understanding the poem’s full scope.

Context

Literary Context: Modernism

The Hollow Men is one of the defining texts of **Modernism**, a literary and artistic movement that emerged in Europe around 1870 and continued until approximately 1945.

Modernism was a response to a rapidly changing world: increasingly urban, industrial, and secular; less bound by tradition and religion. Modernist artists felt that the old forms of writing simply could not capture these new realities, so they developed radically new forms: stream of consciousness, collage, fragmentation, and free verse.

Eliot and Modernism: Eliot was not optimistic about these changes. He mourned what was being lost – the cultural coherence, the religious faith, the shared traditions. His Modernism is a Modernism of grief and alienation. In poems like *The Hollow Men* and *The Waste Land*, he turns to fragments – scraps of allusion, broken prayers, half-remembered songs – not to celebrate the new but to document the damage.

The Hollow Men is a prime example of a Modernist poem because it formally *enacts* the cultural collapse it describes. It is innovative – inventing new ways of writing – but its innovation is in the service of loss, not progress. The broken form is the broken world made visible on the page.

Historical Context: World War I

The Hollow Men was written across the early 1920s and first published in 1925, in the immediate aftermath of the First World War (1914–1918). WWI was a catastrophic and world-altering event:

- Millions died in battles whose strategic gains were often measured in *metres* of ground.
- The industrial scale of the killing – machine guns, poison gas, artillery barrages – was unlike anything in previous human history.

- As the war dragged on and its justifications grew thinner, it created a profound **crisis of confidence** in European culture.

Eliot’s personal connection: Though Eliot did not fight, one of his closest friends, Jean Verdenal, died at the Battle of Gallipoli in 1915. After the war, traumatised survivors found themselves adrift in a culture that had lost confidence in itself. The poem is their elegy and their indictment.

Core Argument

The war showed that the “increased power of industrial societies allowed for killing on a scale never seen before in human history.” This is the shadow that falls between the Europe of before and after – between the idea of civilisation and its reality.

Eliot’s personal crisis: The significance of *The Hollow Men* is also rooted in its origin as a response to the “blackest moment” of Eliot’s personal life. Following a nervous breakdown in 1921 and subsequent institutionalisation, Eliot’s work became what critics call a “manifestation of desolation and pain,” capturing the trauma not only of an individual but of a civilisation “scarred by the aftermath of war.”

The Second Industrial Revolution had concurrently imposed a “lifeless routine” and “monotonous urban existence” that Eliot viewed as dehumanising. Individuals were reduced to “mere functions” in a mechanised society: a concern manifest in the hollow men’s circular, mechanical movements and their inability to break repetitive cycles.

Contextual Summary Table

Contextual Dimension	Impact on the Poem	Thematic Manifestation
Post-WWI trauma	Universal hopelessness and meaninglessness	“Broken glass,” “dry cellar,” “broken columns”
Eliot’s mental breakdown	“Manifestation of a damaged psyche” and personal agony	The Shadow as symbol of paralysis and inability to act
Secularity and failing faith	Transition from nihilism toward cautious Christian faith	Fragmented prayers and the “multifoliate rose” motif

Modernist aesthetics	Adoption of fragmentation, polyphony, and allusion	A “collage of dialogues” and non-linear structural progression
Second Industrial Revolution	Mechanised, dehumanising routine	Circular movements; hollow men reduced to “mere functions”

Key Critics and Critical Perspectives

Critic Reference Table

Critic	Argument	Best Applied To
T.S. Eliot (1921)	“literary collage of evocative images” – defines his own Objective Correlative technique.	Any discussion of imagery or emotional effect.
Koo (2021)	“fragments that flow and melt into each other continuously”	The Lord’s Prayer truncation; fragmented form.
Edgar (2015)	“seamless movement, a symphonic elegy unified by its diversity”	Eliot’s cross-textual aesthetic ingenuity.
Miller	Eliot “offers a fleeting glimpse of a way out of emptiness”	The “fading star” as a qualified, fragile hope; the poem is not purely nihilistic.
Everett Gillis	The poem is “not a poem about hope” but a definitive representation of “darkness, emptiness, and meaninglessness”; the “multifoliate rose” is merely a mocking image of what has been lost.	Nihilistic reading; total paralysis with no redemption.
Strothmann and Ryan	The “desire for enlightenment” within the poem “creates a hopeful expectation of potential rebirth”; the “perpetual star” is a genuine symbol of divine grace that “nevertheless endures.”	Counter-argument to Gillis; spiritual possibility remains.
Ogunpitan	Eliot’s use of “meaningless engagements” like “rustic dance” and “folk expression” reflects a “White supremacist’s apprehension” of the Harlem Renaissance; the poem’s “universal” claims are shaped by Eliot’s “Western conservative outlook.”	Post-colonial critique; complicates claims to universality.

Jungian reading	The Shadow is the “unknown, dark psychic material” the individual must confront; the hollow men’s failure to confront it results in “psychological fragmentation” and “vertiginous personality collapse.”	Psychological lens for the Shadow symbol in Section V.
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Nihilistic Reading: Everett Gillis

Gillis argues *The Hollow Men* is “not a poem about hope.” The poem represents absolute “spiritual stasis”: the hollow men are permanently emptied, the “multifoliate rose” is a mocking image of what has been lost rather than a genuine promise, and the “whimper” is the sound of a civilisation that simply runs down. On this reading, there is no antivenom – the poem is the diagnosis without a cure.

Hopeful Reading: Strothmann and Ryan

Strothmann and Ryan argue that the “desire for enlightenment” within the poem “creates a hopeful expectation of potential rebirth.” The hollow men *want* to be connected to God – they hear the secondary voice, they know the prayers, they yearn for the “perpetual star.” That desire, however frustrated, is evidence that faith is not entirely extinct. The “multifoliate rose” foreshadows Eliot’s later *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) and *Journey of the Magi* (1927), where spiritual rebirth becomes possible.

HSC Key Point

HSC application: Use Gillis to support a reading of total paralysis; use Strothmann and Ryan to argue the poem holds open a “liminal” possibility of redemption. The tension between them is itself the poem’s argument.

Post-Colonial Reading: Ogunpitan

Ogunpitan interrogates Eliot’s “racial bigotry and intolerance,” arguing that the poem’s use of “rustic dance” and “folk expression” (the nursery rhyme parody, the circular ritual) outside the European literary tradition reflects a “White supremacist’s apprehension” of the Harlem Renaissance and non-Western cultural forms. This reading

complicates the poem's claim to "universal" significance and reminds the reader that Eliot's "Western conservative outlook" shaped which traditions count as civilised and which count as barbaric.

Jungian Reading

The Shadow in Section V can be analysed as a Jungian archetype: the "unknown, dark psychic material" that every individual must confront and integrate to achieve psychological wholeness. The hollow men's failure to confront their Shadow results in "psychological fragmentation" – a "vertiginous element in the personality" that prevents them from functioning. The Shadow is not external evil but their own repressed guilt, incapacity, and spiritual failure turned back on them.

Comparative Analysis: Eliot's Poetic Suite

For HSC Module B, you must treat the suite as a cohesive whole. Focus on no more than three poems and provide in-depth treatment rather than surface-level listing.

vs. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915)

Feature	The Hollow Men	Prufrock
Speaker	Collective "we" – a chorus of lost souls	Individual "I" – one paralysed self
Paralysis	Civilisational, collective, post-war	Personal, neurotic, social anxiety
Animal synecdoche	"rats' feet over broken glass"	"ragged claws scuttling across silent seas"
Landscape	Arid mythological underworld	Modern urban drawing rooms and streets
Ending	"Not with a bang but a whimper"	"human voices wake us, and we drown"

Key comparative argument: Both poems are built on paralysis, but Eliot scales up between 1915 and 1925. Prufrock is an *individual* soul unable to disturb the universe – one man's private neurosis. The hollow men are a *collective*: that private neurosis has metastasised into a civilisational condition. The "rats' feet over broken glass" directly echoes Prufrock's "ragged claws": the same synecdoche for de-individualisation and inertia, now applied to an entire generation.

Formal contrast: Prufrock is a single dramatic monologue with a clear "I." *The Hollow Men* is polyvocal and choral – no stable "I" exists. This formal difference enacts the thematic one: the self has fragmented from one to many.

vs. “Preludes” (1911) and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” (1915)

Feature	The Hollow Men	Preludes / Rhapsody
Temporal setting	Post-war; purgatorial timelessness	Pre-war; specific urban night/morning
Landscape	Mythological desert, dead land	Modern city: streets, gas lamps, gutters
Authority figure	God’s absent eyes	The moon’s cold, surveilling authority
Spiritual state	Actively severed from God	Pre-religious: urban numbness, not spiritual crisis
Form	Collective free verse; fragmented suite	Urban sketch; individual persona

Moon vs. God’s eyes: In *Rhapsody*, reality is held in “lunar synthesis” – the moon surveys from above, cold and indifferent. In *The Hollow Men*, the equivalent authority (God’s eyes) has disappeared entirely. The hollow men are not supervised – they are abandoned. This marks a deepening of despair: where *Rhapsody* has determinism, *The Hollow Men* has void.

Both poems, both inertia: *Rhapsody* sustains stasis through lunar determinism, whereas *The Hollow Men* sustains it through the Shadow’s severing of cause from effect. Both isolate the “wind” trope to accentuate lack of spiritual will; in *Rhapsody* the wind twists and remembers, in *The Hollow Men* the hollow men *become* the wind: aimless and meaningless.

vs. “Journey of the Magi” (1927)

Feature	The Hollow Men	Journey of the Magi
Spiritual state	Permanently severed from God	Transformed by encounter with the divine
Action	Paralysed; unable to complete a prayer	Undertake a “hard and bitter agony” and arrive
The star	“Fading star”: hope that is dying	The actual star of Bethlehem, which guides them
Ending	“Not with a bang but a whimper”	“I had seen birth and death / But had thought they were different”
Form	Collective, fragmented, choral	Individual dramatic monologue; narrative structure

Key comparative argument: *Journey of the Magi* is the antithesis to the hollow men’s entrapment. The Magi undergo a “hard and bitter agony” that results in genuine spiritual transformation – they *arrive*, they *witness*, they are *changed*. The hollow men cannot complete a prayer. The “perpetual star” the hollow men can only fantasise about is the very star that guided the Magi to Bethlehem.

The epiphany argument: Eliot’s own conversion to Anglicanism (1927) is the biographical link. *The Hollow Men* is the last station of the nihilistic phase; *Journey of the Magi* is the first station of the next. Together they form a before-and-after that gives each poem more weight in the context of the other.

Summary Comparison Table

Feature	The Hollow Men	Prufrock	Preludes / Rhapsody	Journey of the Magi
Speaker	Collective chorus	Individual	Individual	Individual
Landscape	Mythological desert	Urban modern	Urban modern	Wilderness / Bethlehem
Religious tone	Fragmented, failed prayers	None (secular anxiety)	Pre-religious numbness	Tentative re-birth
Paralysis type	Spiritual / civilizational	Social / personal	Urban / mechanical	Overcome through agony
Ending quality	"Whimper" of resignation	Drowning in human voices	Mechanical routine	"Hard and bitter" crisis
Form	Polyvocal free verse suite	Dramatic monologue	Urban sketch / vignette	Narrative monologue

HSC Band 6 Strategies

What Markers Look For

Level	Student Response	NESA Marker Feedback
Band 1–2	Descriptive recount of the “scarecrow” imagery	“Avoiding simple descriptions or recounts of the text”
Band 3–4	Identifying similes and metaphors without explaining purpose	“Address all parts of the question; not just generic terms”
Band 5–6	Evaluating how the “objective correlative” evokes “spiritual aridity”	“Showcase how the work raised new or clarifying questions”
Band 6 (top)	Analysing textual integrity through register shifts, Dantean allusions, and polyvocality	“Construct a conceptual framework; treat the suite as a cohesive whole”

Key Band 6 Moves

- Frame your argument around Eliot’s **ontological journey**: the movement from social entrapment toward a potential (if elusive) spiritual salvation.
- Use **evaluative language**: verbs like “challenges,” “subverts,” “asserts,” “interrogates.” Explain how Eliot’s “unique voice” has altered your views on the human condition.
- Do **not** list techniques without linking them to the question. Every technique must serve an argument about meaning.
- Discuss **distinctive features of form**: enjambment, polyphony, register shifts, the objective correlative, typographic isolation.
- Demonstrate awareness of **critical perspectives** (Gillis vs. Strothmann and Ryan) to show you can evaluate competing interpretations.

Practice Essay Prompts (2024–2026)

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1. "It is through its detailed illustration of human life that poetry becomes memorable." Discuss this statement with close reference to *The Hollow Men* and one other poem.
 2. "A key aspect of the poetry's ongoing appeal is Eliot's use of meaningful structure." To what extent does the structure of *The Hollow Men* contribute to its textual integrity?
 3. "The power of Eliot's poetry lies in his use of unique imagery, using contemporary objects and vernacular to challenge perceptions." Evaluate this view in relation to your reading of two poems.
 4. "When you engage with works of quality you feel that your internal planes have shifted." To what extent does this resonance apply to Eliot's suite of poetry?

Essay Resources

Conclusion Notes

Eliot's poetry is a "seamless movement, a symphonic elegy unified by its diversity" (Edgar, 2015) in objective correlatives and intertextuality, profoundly reflecting the Modern man's existential plight. Exposing the decaying urban psyche and polluted world, his cross-textual aesthetic ingenuity forces the reader to confront inauthenticity. The hollow men are not simply sad – they are dangerous: their despair is contagious, their emptiness has infected the landscape around them, and their inability to act makes them complicit in the collapse of the very civilisation they represent.

Essay Notes: Body Paragraph 1

Topic sentence: Societal decay following WWI catalysed a loss of humanity and *aboulia* (a nihilistic lack of will), made evident through the fragmented, liminal dramatic monologue of the persona.

Key argument: *The Hollow Men* uses episodic free verse to portray alienation as a product of humanity's moral and spiritual vacuity. It functions as a *scripto-therapeutic* text for a post-WWI population pervaded with trauma, vulnerability, and a loss of faith in God's benevolence.

Technique notes:

"*wind in dry grass / Or rats' feet over broken glass*": The imagery creates an apocalyptic portrait of an arid and desolate soul. The anapaest metre conjures a typographic vector between the unstressed kinetic lexeme "broken" and the stressed "glass," propelling the reader through the wasteland. The "dry grass" infers *aboulia*: a nihilistic absence of will, trapped in purgatorial cyclicity amidst the absolutist knowledge of both heavenly paradise and hellfire. Eliot appropriates Dante's *ignavi* – the shades in *Inferno* who remained impartial between God and Satan, trapped in barren cyclicity.

The literal/Imagist “dry grass” and the figurative “broken glass” together symbolise both societal and spiritual inertia.

“*Rat’s coat, crowskin, crossed staves / In a field / Behaving as the wind behaves*”: Heteroglossic four-section dramatic monologue delineates a collective and conforming sense of dislocation from spiritual identity. The polyphonic cumulative listing (*enumeratio*) instils paranoia and defamiliarisation. The “wind” trope, complemented by the “rat” motif, highlights mortality and impotence. The “crossed staves” metaphorically allude to musical staves which, if overlapped, incur an inversion of reality and aporia.

Critical reading: Eliot critiques the collective abject melancholy experienced following WWI carnage. The “hollow men” are not only purgatorial souls but also the *living*, who ascribe their own sentiment to the deceased – symbolised by “putting on” the necrotic “rat’s coat” and “crowskin.” Eliot’s dramatic monologue is contrary to the status quo: his poetic voice is embedded with his generation’s yearning for individuality and the desire to surmount soulful in-betweenness.

Comparative note (if writing on ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’): The episodic free verse alienation of *Hollow Men* is akin to how the moon’s surveillance is reflected on humanity in *Rhapsody*. Both poems contain absolutist knowledge (paradise/hellfire in *Hollow Men*; lunar synthesis in *Rhapsody*) yet both extrapolate upon the persona’s and the responder’s inertia and inconclusiveness.

Essay Notes: Body Paragraph 2

Topic sentence: A sense of futility spurs the spiritual dilapidation of the human psyche, expressed through a synecdochal stream of consciousness representing collective purgatorial existence.

Key argument: Through a literary and historical palimpsest of spiritual concerns, Eliot forms a tapestry of Modernist anxieties, likening vacuous society to the helplessness of ritualistic effigies.

Technique notes:

“*Leaning together / Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!*”: The historical allusion to Guy Fawkes Day, combined with archaic language and eponymy in “Alas!”, evokes an exclamatory elegy of communal suffering and despondency. Eliot characterises an il-

lusory facade of human sanity: mankind “lean[s] together” and subscribes to a society that erodes autonomy, until they become as disposable as a Guy Fawkes effigy “filled with straw.” By likening spiritually vacuous society to the helplessness of ritualistic effigies, the futility and powerlessness of the hollow men is exemplified through the lexical vector of “leaning together.”

Intertextual note: “Headpiece filled with straw” may also be an intertextual reference to *The Wizard of Oz* – the “mindless” scarecrow yearning for a brain from the Wizard, the semiotics of the entity’s mysticism arguably alluding to the purgatorial soul’s longing for God’s redemption.

“For Thine is / Life is / For Thine is the”: The plosive fragmentation contrasts with “This is the way the world ends,” where the iambic pentameter highlights the abrupt termination of logic and the finality of divine judgement. The deliberate omission of “Kingdom” from the Anglican Lord’s Prayer is textually dislocated from its dynamic and consistent application throughout the poem prior to this coda. The Shadow intervenes at the moment of supplication, severing them from God.

Critical reading (the “antivenom”): Despite the pessimism, “This is the way the world ends” is also a *realisation* – an epiphany marking the instant that the “hollow men” become Eliot himself. This epiphany parallels the poet’s own conversion from Unitarianism to Anglicanism, from the spiritual “day” to the revelatory “night.” Eliot extirpates the stasis sustained throughout the poem through a cathartic release of revelation and purpose.

Comparative note (if writing on ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’): By subscribing to societies that erode autonomy, mankind becomes as disposable as a Guy Fawkes effigy. The collective purgatorial existence in *Hollow Men* derives from the in-betweenness of original identity and fragmented cognition, whereas *Rhapsody* sustains this stasis through lunar determinism rather than resolving it.

Exemplar Essay Paragraph 1

Eliot's dramatic monologue *The Hollow Men* (1925) intensifies the post-war nihilism that induces existential and spiritual vacuity, fuelled by the loss of religious certainty. Eliot responds to the divisive Treaty of Versailles, which offered little hope for peace, and the rise of Darwinism, which undermined the legitimacy of the Bible, by portraying the fragmented free verse questioning of his unique "hollow men" entrapped in a purgatorial landscape. These shadowy non-entities – "hollow men... shape without form, shade without colour" – parallel Dante's *ignavi* from the *Divine Comedy: Inferno*, where the repetition of "without" displays the spiritual vacuity of urban citizens within their liminal post-WWI world. Moreover, echoing the "masquerades" of *Preludes* (and *Prufrock*), the cacophonous plosive consonants in "deliberate disguises / Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves" reveal how the "hollow men" attempt to avoid the judgmental "eyes I dare not meet in dreams." Eliot further parodies the nursery rhyme "prickly pear / Prickly pear prickly pear" against the fertile "mulberry bush" and "cactus land" imagery to foreground the emotional sterility and physical barrenness of his post-WWI world. This spiritual isolation culminates in a disintegrated doxology through the fragmented Lord's Prayer – "For thine is / For life is / For thine is the" – reinforcing the collective suffering of spiritual emptiness within the modern world. Ultimately, the hollow men's inability to create verbal cogency within their communication results in the bathos of "This is the way the world ends / not with a bang but a whimper," which ironically subverts the cataclysmic imagery associated with Revelation's predictions, instead bluntly portraying the loss of morality in the modern age. Thus, Eliot's oeuvre seamlessly interweaves "fragments that flow and melt into each other continuously" (Koo, 2021), satirising the moral vacuity of post-WWI and capturing the ontological crisis of Eliot's twentieth-century world.

Structural Breakdown: Exemplar Paragraph 1

Move	What It Does
Opening sentence	Establishes context (Treaty of Versailles, Darwinism) and the poem's core argument.
"parallel Dante's <i>ignavi</i> ..."	Intertextual link embedded inside the analysis of a technique (repetition of "without").
"echoing the masquerades..."	Comparative reference to another Eliot poem; plosive consonance analysed as both sound and argument.
Nursery rhyme parody	Form and allusion analysed together as a single interpretive point.

Lord's Prayer fragmentation	Form (doxology/fragmentation) linked to collective suffering.
Bathos and Revelation	Technique (bathos) used to make a larger cultural/theological argument.
Closing critic quote	Koo (2021) used to synthesise, not introduce.

Exemplar Essay Paragraph 2

Written amidst the moral disillusionment of post-World War Europe, the free verse poem *The Hollow Men* reflects the spiritual desolation and cultural uncertainty of the interwar period, shaped by the collapse of traditional religious frameworks. The anaphora and diacope in “We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men,” heightened by enjambment, create a chant-like rhythm that depicts the modern individual confined in paradoxical stasis: “stuffed” with the superficial pursuits of industrial and nationalistic ambition, whilst “hollow” of any spiritual fulfilment. Furthermore, the oxymoron of “waking alone” with the collective pronoun of “we” in “waking alone / At the hour when we are / Trembling with tenderness” highlights the alienating effects of Modernity, as individuals experience psychological isolation devoid of interpersonal connection despite proximity to others. Eliot further adopts the Imagist rejection of Romantic sentiment and technical perfection by fragmenting the biblical allusion “For Thine is / Life is / For Thine is the” to simulate a broken prayer, reflecting Modern scepticism towards faith spurred by industrial rationality and the illusion of progress, culminating in the ironic declaration “not with a bang but with a whimper.” Thereby, Eliot depicts the modern self suspended in an internal purgatorial limbo, paralysed by spiritual and emotional disconnection that subverts the vaunted “bang” of Modern industrial progress.

Structural Breakdown: Exemplar Paragraph 2

Move	What It Does
Opening sentence	Historical context (interwar, collapse of religious frameworks) established before any textual reference.
Anaphora + diacope + enjambment	Three formal techniques analysed together as a single argument about paradoxical stasis; “stuffed” vs “hollow” read as industrial ambition vs spiritual void.
Oxymoron (“waking alone” + “we”)	One technique used to make the Modernity/alienation argument; proximity without connection.
Imagist rejection + fragmented prayer	Form and context fused: the <i>way</i> the prayer breaks is itself the argument about Modern scepticism.
Ironic declaration (“whimper”)	Final technique names the irony explicitly and links back to the opening context (industrial “bang”).
No critic used	This paragraph’s strength is in the density of formal analysis; a critic could be added at the close if needed.

Vocabulary Glossary

Word	Line	Definition and Notes
Mistah Kurtz	Before 1	Character from Conrad's <i>Heart of Darkness</i> ; European ivory trader in colonial Africa held up as a symbol of Western progress and enlightenment, but who went insane and made himself a god-like figure.
Old Guy	Before 1	Reference to Guy Fawkes, who plotted to blow up Parliament in 1605, was caught, and executed. Children make straw effigies of him every November 5th (Guy Fawkes Day) and burn them.
Headpiece	4	Head or skull.
Paralysed	12	Frozen, unable to move.
Gesture	12	Action or movement.
Motion	12	Used in an archaic sense here: <i>desire</i> or <i>inclination</i> , not physical movement. Covers appetite, hunger, even lust.
Solemn	27	Serious or sombre.
Deliberate	32	Carefully designed or concocted.
Crowskin	33	The skin or feathers of a crow. In fly-fishing, a "skin" also refers to feathers of a bird.
Staves	33	Sticks or staffs; dried pieces of wood. Also: the horizontal lines of a musical score.
Supplication	43	A gesture of submission to a higher power. A "supplicant" makes a request or plea from a position of powerlessness; prayer is often described as a form of supplication.
Grope	58	Move forward blindly, feeling the way with one's hands.
Tumid	60	Swollen or overflowing.
Perpetual	63	Undying, endless, immortal.
Multifoliate	64	Having many leaves or petals.

Thine	77, 91, 92, 94	Yours. An obsolete word – in its day, more intimate than “yours,” implying closeness. Here it is from the Bible; the “you” being addressed is God.
Conception	78	Having an idea or plan. Also has a religious sense: Jesus’s birth is the “Immaculate Conception.” The Shadow severing “conception” from “creation” may thus imply it is cutting off new life itself.
Creation	79	Acting on an idea and making it real.
Spasm	85	Sexual satisfaction or release.
Potency	86	The power to make or create something.
Existence	87	Something that is real and has been created.
Essence	88	The ideal or core of something; in philosophy, the fundamental truth from which all copies descend.
Descent	89	Decline or decay. Also: the process by which an essence becomes real (descends into reality).

Space for Further Annotations

Use this section to add new quotes, techniques, and analysis as you continue studying.

Additional Quotes to Annotate

Quote	Technique	Analysis

Comparative Links to Other Texts

Feature	The Hollow Men	Other Text (fill in)
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Essay Plans

Draft your essay plans here using the Band 6 structural models from Chapter 20.

My Notes

Use these pages to add your own annotations, essay plans, and personal reflections as you study the poem.

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