



# The Hollow Men

Thomas Stearns Eliot  
(1925)

## THE PLOT

*The Hollow Men* can be read as an extension of the design of **quest and failure of *The Waste Land***. This poem is introduced by **two epigraphs**: the former, 'Mistah Kurtz – he dead', uttered by a black boy in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (→ 6.16), emphasises a connection between a savage ritual and Eliot's hollow men. The latter epigraph, 'A penny for the Old Guy', stresses that Eliot's poem relates to the ceremonial straw effigies burnt on November 5<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of the death of Guy Fawkes, the conspirator who organised the Gunpowder Plot.

## THE THEME

The history of Kurtz in Conrad's novel is the study of primitive rituals of succession, initiation and fertility. Kurtz has been initiated into the tribe, becoming its shaman, its 'rain and fine weather' maker, and he has been

ceremonially worshipped, thus becoming a symbol of the disastrous descent into dark places. The main parallel between *Heart of Darkness* and *The Hollow Men* consists in the theme of degradation through the rejection of good, of despair through consequent guilt.

## THE STYLE

Although *The Hollow Men* is a poem about the dilemmas of belief, it is also explicit about language. Whatever it is that has happened to these men, loss of faith and belief in themselves, **their voices have been dried up** (line 5) and **been made 'quiet and meaningless'** (line 7). The speaker perceives a living language elsewhere but he cannot hear it, neither can his eyes open wide on a visionary positive moment (line 34): no redemptive vision is possible and the journey through hell, begun with *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (→ Text Bank 79), continues.

## COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

### 1 READ the text and answer these questions about *The Hollow Men*.

- Why is this poem to be read as an extension of *The Waste Land*?
- What introduces the poem?
- What is the theme both of *The Hollow Men* and *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad?
- What does the speaker of this poem perceive?



## This is the dead land

You are going to read and analyse the first, third and fourth sections of *The Hollow Men*.

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Section I, III, IV

- I
- We are the **hollow** men  
We are the stuffed<sup>1</sup> men  
Leaning together<sup>2</sup>  
Headpiece filled with straw<sup>3</sup>. Alas!
- 5 Our dried voices, when  
We **whisper** together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass<sup>4</sup>  
Or rats' feet over broken glass<sup>5</sup>
- 10 In our dry cellar

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

- stuffed. Impagliati.
- Leaning together. Che si appoggiano l'un l'altro.
- straw. Paglia.
- wind in dry grass. Vento nell'erba secca.
- rats' feet over broken glass. Zampe di topo sopra vetri rotti.



Those who have crossed<sup>6</sup>  
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom  
15 Remember us – if at all<sup>7</sup> – not as lost  
Violent souls, but only  
As the hollow men  
The stuffed men.

[...]

### III

This is the dead land  
20 This is cactus land  
Here the stone images  
Are raised<sup>8</sup>, here they receive  
The supplication of a dead man's hand  
Under the twinkle of a fading star<sup>9</sup>.

25 Is it like this  
In death's other kingdom  
Waking alone<sup>10</sup>  
At the hour when we are  
Trembling with tenderness<sup>11</sup>  
30 Lips that would kiss  
Form prayers to broken stone<sup>12</sup>.

### IV

The eyes are not here  
There are no eyes here  
In this valley of dying stars  
35 In this hollow valley  
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms<sup>13</sup>

In this last of meeting places<sup>14</sup>  
We grope together  
And avoid speech<sup>15</sup>  
40 Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

Sightless, unless  
The eyes reappear  
As the perpetual star  
Multifoliate rose<sup>16</sup>  
45 Of death's twilight kingdom  
The hope only  
Of empty men.

6 Those who have crossed. Coloro che hanno attraversato.

7 if at all. Se pure succede.

8 the stone ... raised. Le immagini di pietra sorgono.

9 The supplication ... fading star. La supplica della mano di un morto sotto lo scintillio di una stella che si va spegnendo.

10 In death's ... alone. Nell'altro regno della morte svegliandoci soli.

11 At the hour ... with tenderness. Nell'ora in cui tremiamo di tenerezza.

12 Lips ... broken stone. Le labbra che vorrebbero baciare innalzano preghiere alla pietra infranta.

13 This broken ... kingdoms. Questa mascella spezzata dei nostri regni perduti.

14 In this ... places. In quest'ultimo dei luoghi d'incontro.

15 avoid speech. Evitiamo di parlare.

16 Multifoliate rose. Rosa dalle molte foglie; rimando al *Paradiso* dantesco, versi 13-15, del XXXII canto.



## LITERARY COMPETENCE

### > VOCABULARY

**1 READ** the poem and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- 1 bisbigliamo .....
- 2 andiamo a tentoni .....
- 3 gonfio .....
- 4 vuoti .....

### > COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

**2 READ** the first section again and find out

- where the poem takes place;
- who the speakers are;
- what their voices are like;
- what their shape is;
- what the colour linked to them is;
- how they are remembered.

**3 FOCUS** on the third and fourth sections again and answer the following questions.

- 1 Where do the hollow men live?
- 2 What gathers this place to its inhabitants?
- 3 What are the stone images?
- 4 Are there any eyes in this valley of death (lines 32-35)?
- 5 Who is sightless?
- 6 May they see again? What does this imply?

### > COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

**4 FOCUS** on the hollow men.

- 1 Identify the two similes used in the first section to present them and state their function.
- 2 State what the cactus used to describe the place where they live is the symbol of.
- 3 They are sightless but they desire the eyes in the next life. What do the eyes represent?

**5 CONSIDER** the musical devices.

- 1 Do these lines rely on rhymes?
- 2 Look for examples of alliteration and repetition. What effect do they create?

**6 DEFINE** the theme developed in these lines.