

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Modern Zeitgeist: A Study of T. S. Eliot's "Preludes" and "The Hollow Men"**

***Sarita Chanwaria**, Associate Professor (English)

SPC Government College, Ajmer

saritachanwaria@yahoo.com

****Ambika Gahlot**, Assistant Professor (English)

Regional Institute of Education, Ajmer.

Article Received: 01/09/2024; Article Accepted: 04/10/2024; Published Online: 06/10/2024

Abstract: The modern age, also known as 'the age of anxiety,' is characterized by pragmatism, acquisitiveness, urbanization, and alienation. It was an era when religion and spirituality were on the wane, and everywhere, materialism was in the ascendancy. The two world wars brought drastic changes in the life and times of modern man. In the field of literature, many literature critics delineate morbid reality, highlighting spiritual barrenness, emotional vacuity, and the existential dilemma of this period. Famous poet T. S. Eliot is considered synonymous with Modernism. He was a spokesman for his age. His poems exuberantly capture the modern zeitgeist, unveiling the misery and futility of mundane urban life, the isolation and faithlessness of modern city dwellers, and their inefficacy. F.R. Leavis rightly remarks: "Eliot's genius is that of the great poet who has a profound and acute apprehension of the difficulties of his age." His poems, especially "The Hollow Men," "Preludes," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Four Quartets," and "The Wasteland," mirror the spirit of the modern age.

A snapshot of the early 20th century, "Preludes" and "The Hollow Men" are the representative poems of the modernist canon. Both poems survey a difficult and disintegrated world inflicted with angst and anxiety, tension and depression, suffering, and shallowness, but eventually, end on an optimistic note. This paper is an attempt to study and analyze Eliot's "Preludes" and "The Hollow Men" to understand the pinch and plight of the post-war 'lost generation.' The paper envisions the morbid reality of the modern world as depicted in these poems. Also, an effort is made to illustrate Eliot's cognizance of and responsiveness to the existential crisis and alienation of modern man and how subtly the Poet insinuates the way forward.

Keywords: Modernism, Zeitgeist, spiritual barrenness, pragmatism, urban life.

The "Preludes" is a masterpiece in the exploration of a world that is barren yet profound. The metaphorical implications of a life that is fragmented juxtapose with the structure of the poem. It is a series of four short poems published between 1910 and 1911. "The Hollow Men" is another great work penned by the classicist in Literature, T.S. Eliot, and published in the year 1925. Both poems portray the themes of urban life, alienation, fragmentation of modern existence, and the passage of time.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Preludes” open with a stark image of a world that is too lost to be found. Prelude one opens introducing the setting of the poem and underlining the theme of modernity.

The winter evening settles down.

With the smell of steaks in passageways. (Preludes)

The opening line of the poem presents an image of a cold, bleak landscape that metaphorically depicts the barrenness inside of the people of that time. The dark and dismal picture sets the pace of the poem. Eliot skillfully depicts the drudgery of life, making bleak references to the contemporary world. Similarly, “The Hollow Men” offers references to a world inhabited by people who are dead, voices so withered that they barely can be heard. Both poems run in parallel structures, offering modernist settings, one of the world and the other of its inhabitants.

The showers beat

On broken blinds and chimney pots,

And at the corner of the street

A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps. (Preludes)

Eliot is a magician who makes use of the beating of showers and connects them with the eventual war. The use of the words ‘broken blinds’ and ‘chimney pots’ suggests a setting that is marred and in a sorry state. The use of these words evokes a sense of alienation and decay of the modern world that is at the root of modern life. It metaphorically connects the physical decay, amalgamating it with the spiritual decay of the time. Thus, we focus on the moral decline of humanity. These lines are paramount in highlighting the broken barriers that stand between the public and the private spheres, reflecting how the urban environment exposes and invades personal spaces. A similar image captures the essence of modernity in “The Hollow Men,” where the Poet writes:

As wind in a dry glass

Or rats’ feet over broken glass

In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without color,

Paralyzed force, gesture without motion: (The Hollow Men)

In “Preludes,” a ‘lonely cab-horse’ typically a creature of movement and purpose, is cornered in the street. The horse is ‘steaming and stamping,’ suggesting frustration and a lack of direction. The horse here is a metaphor for the predicament of human life in the modern world. Likewise, in the poem “The Hollow Men,” Eliot makes use of ‘paralyzed force,’ and ‘gesture without notion.’ Both lines are sentimentally connected, reflecting the modernist predicament of life that leaves people without essence, without voice, without spirituality, and without gesture.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The urban scene can be interpreted as a metaphor for the existential crisis faced by individuals in the modern world. It aligns with the exploration of existential angst and the questioning of traditional sources of meaning.

Prelude one concludes with a positive note when Eliot writes:

And then the lighting of the lamps. (Preludes)

This line is suggestive of the optimism that is there though hidden but isn't extinguished. Here, lamps are suggestive of the guiding power of spirituality. Though the culture and traditions of the world are declining yet there is a hope that the world may be saved through the light of spirituality. Eliot's use of 'muddy feet', and 'dingy shades' in "Preludes" serve as objective correlatives, evoking a deep sense of spiritual alienation and dehumanization that percolates within the fabric of the poem. The poem has a deep sense of affinity with "The Hollow Men," which has similar themes of frustration, anxiety about the modern world, and lack of spirituality. Eliot brilliantly employs an impersonal tone in both poems as a hallmark to achieve a modernist outlook. Impressionistic techniques, fragmentation in ideas, and barren modern desolate settings amplify the mood the poems create. The structure of both the poems (both are divided into parts), repetition in words and ideas, and spiritual barrenness form the underlining structure of the seminal modernistic works. The poems can be read as a critique of modern life and society, questioning not just the ethics and morals of society but also the loss of spiritual and moral bearings. The outlook of a world that has failed itself can be sensed in the line:

With the other masquerades
That time resumes,
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms. (Preludes)

These famous lines from "Preludes" are conspicuous of the hollow traits of men who live in 'dingy shades in a thousand furnished rooms.' The word 'masquerades' suggests artificiality, pretense, and materialism that are preoccupied in the minds of modern men. The choice of the word 'Dingy shades' aptly reflects the disenchanting reality of modern man and the loss of morality. There is superficiality in human beings and a pervasive sense of despair. 'Furnished rooms' works as a metaphor suggesting the growing materialism in humans and the sense of isolation that follows. "The Hollow Men" follows a complete arc that reflects the decay of humanity, loss of culture in the western world and a growing sense of materialism. "Preludes" follows similar modernist traits, underlining a setting that reflects spiritual barrenness, loss of faith, and a growing sense of materialism. The hollow men are empty from inside, this is metaphorically suggestive of lack of spirituality.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Preludes highlight similar notions when Eliot says:

Sitting along the bed's edge, where
You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands. (Preludes)

Eliot draws on the grim realities of a world that becomes active against the backdrop of the night. The darkness of the night is paradoxically comfortable, revealing 'The thousand sordid images' which implicate the soul of a human being. This darkness is suggestive of a world devoid of any light (spirituality). This uncultured world is enveloped in faithlessness. People walk in the loitered streets, indicating that morality and ethics have no place in this modern world. Everyday tasks are carried out without any hope of betterment. People have adapted themselves to this new world where everything appears to be dark and dingy. This new world is developed outside the circumscription of the old world of order, morality, and spiritual consciousness. Here, when the light creeps in, it is only 'between the shutters,' and the sparrows are 'in the gutters.' Fragmented truths are presented by concealing the real identity of the speaker. This disintegration of the self is another key feature of Modernism. Indirect references allude to ambiguous conclusions, adding to the horizons of the text. Eliot has developed this idea in "The Hollow Men" as well when he writes-

This is the dead land.
This is cactus land
Here are the stone images
Are raised...(The Hollow Men)

The Poet supplicates the idea of a world devoid of any meaning. This world is lacking substance, conviction, and a true sense of purpose. People are described as 'stuffed men,' suggesting that these modern men are devoid of any true identity. This land is a 'wasteland' inhabited by hollow men. The use of 'stone images' reduces the idols to just stones without any power of spirituality. This powerful visual imagery has deep metaphorical undertones, as it highlights the underlying meaning of humanity's loss of purpose and soul. This lack of vision of a tomorrow and loss of faith exerts its implication not just in "The Hollow Men" but also in "Preludes when the poet talks about the night full of 'sordid images of which your soul is made.'

Eliot captures grim, realistic impressions from the sordid realities of modern life to paint a stark portrait of both the physical landscape of urban decay in "Preludes" and the disturbing psychological impact of a crumbling faith in "The Hollow Men." The profound psychological impact of eroding faith and feelings creates the very essence of Modernism, which encompasses the core of both poems. "It marked a departure from spirituality and the death of hope. One of the major

RESEARCH ARTICLE

landscapes and settings dealt with in the poetry of the age was the city.” (Santharam) One can see how befitting the background contributes to adding layers of meaning to the poems. The cityscapes are important factors contributing to generating a modernistic context in the poems.

Eliot asserts the spiritual emptiness of the modern age, which is more evident when he mentions, "*This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.*" He underlines the stark image of a world lacking in spiritual depth and subtly projects the unremarkable end of human existence, devoid of any grand significance. The poems brilliantly weave the modernist theme of existential dilemmas, taking references from the everyday tragedy of modern man.

The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted;
They flickered against the ceiling. (Preludes)

Eliot explores the notion of existence, spirituality, and faith here. There is so much chaos that it becomes difficult to underline the futility and vanity of life itself. What becomes particularly interesting is the notion of a home in the 21st-century world. The faithlessness in people drives them forward in life. The rootlessness of the age finds expression in the dingy imagery of the world filled with chaos and dirt. The 'sordid images' Eliot talks about navigating us to the similar aching reality of the Hollow Men. Thus, both poems draw meaning from one another. This sense of modernity traps humans in the absurdity of life. A life devoid of passion, of light, and of meaning. Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, talks about similar estrangement where man is trapped without hope, reason, and meaning. Camus writes: "...in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a loss of home or hope of a promised land." These lines reverberate a state of senselessness and absurdity. Homelessness. Man has left behind so much of what he calls a home (roots), trying to frame meaning or purpose in this life. He is hollow from within, withering, and spiritually uprooted. Eliot cascades a plethora of images that reflect the barrenness found inside humans, which renders him hollow. "Preludes" and "The Hollow Men" are entangled in fragmented human existence, focusing on the dingy state of life lacking a soul. The lack of any meaning alludes to a lack of home. A fixed foot that provides solace, meaning, and a purpose to come back to. The Hollow Men are stuffed men, as described by the Poet, both in the literal and philosophical senses. Absurdity focuses on the lack of meaning in life. Stuffed here justifies the absurdist notion of superficiality and hollowness.

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech (The Hollow Men)

These lines convey an intricate sense of isolation woven to reflect that people are together physically yet far away from one another. In the modern world, physical closeness has no relation to emotional closeness. Homelessness in this regard is so much more than just a lack of shelter. It is a holistic concept involving social barricades found in humans that restrict their emotions from flowing freely. These lines reflect Eliot's concept of Modernism, which states that "The Hollow Men" are

RESEARCH ARTICLE

people physically close to one another but still emotionally detached. They are spiritually disconnected, unable to say what they feel, much like how society sidelines them, rendering them invisible. Absurdism, particularly in this context, is a core of Modernism.

Both “Prelude” and “The Hollow Men” begin with modern settings, painting similar visual imagery of dingy streets to underscore the stark reality of modern existence, highlighting the state of human existence in a mundane world marked by alienation and spiritual desolation. This setting provides an apt background to frame the modern context, suggesting a world devoid of meaning, a home, or purpose, a place where people are stranded without direction or hope. This homelessness is imprinted in the use of the word *hollow valley* symbolizing desolation and despair close to the experience of dying, captured in the following lines:

In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley...(The Hollow Men)

Much like the experience of homelessness, this valley of dying stars is hollow too. The poem proceeds to cast “The Hollow Men” not as humans, taking from them the fleshly attire, reducing them to mere shadows. The modernistic aspect of loss of faith has reduced humans to the mere shadows whose existence dwindles between idea and reality, motion and act.

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow (The Hollow Men)

This sense of oscillation alludes to the metaphorical implication of homelessness, further reducing the hollow men to mere shadows, implicating the loss of hope to attain any meaning in the physical, emotional, and spiritual realms of life.

The loss of spirituality is reflected in Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” which implies similar thematic notions of a world devoid of any meaning and the gradual demise of spirituality. The Poet laments the loss of faith in society, delineating the metaphorical misery of the human condition in the following lines:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled. (Dover Beach)

Arnold weaves his concerns in the form of a dramatic monologue reflecting on the state of loss of spirituality prevailing in Victorian society, warning the world of its serious implications that will follow. The Sea of Faith, which was once full, is gradually retreating, leaving the edges of the world naked. Spirituality binds the world together in faith, working as a glue to close the edges and cracks of the world, preventing it from being naked. This loss of faith is the loss of certainty that connects the thematic inclinations of “Dover Beach” with the poems “Preludes” and “The Hollow Men.”

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The ending of “Preludes” and “The Hollow Men” is pivotal in understanding the modern thematic implications in literary canon. Eliot utilizes the modern writing style by incorporating fragmentation, taking into account the minor narratives and the spiritual barrenness of the time. The essence of “The Hollow Men” percolates in the conclusion that embroiders the modern theme of taking into account the minor narratives and normalizing the never-ending absurdist life’s struggle. The ending of “The Hollow Men” lacks any contouring on the part of the Poet when Eliot adds his signature allusion in the lines:

This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper. (The Hollow Men)

The ending reflects a sharp contrast of how we expect the world to come to an end with a bang, but on the contrary, it will end with a whimper. This anticlimactic notion reflects that there is absolute meaninglessness in the world and no resolution to this constant struggle in life. The poem touches upon many allusions, adding depth to the fabric of its meaning. The conclusion is only a fragment devoid of any grand symbolism or depth. In contrast to an illustrative or purposeful conclusion, Eliot's concluding imagery casts reflection on the human existence that fades out gradually, not with any significant bang, but with a trivial whimper, reinforcing the hopeless, purposeless, and rootless state of human life.

The same tone of cynicism and meaninglessness is reiterated in the “Preludes” when Eliot concludes it in the final lines:

Wipe your hand across your mouth and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots. (Preludes)

Eliot paints a world devoid of purpose or progress, where monotonous lifestyles and mundane tasks have eaten human souls, rendering their lot 'vacant.'

The ‘ancient women’ gathering fuel in ‘vacant lots’ is powerful imagery suggesting a struggle for survival in a barren, dingy landscape, highlighting the spiritual and emotional desolation of modern man. It also reflects that the fuel, i.e., the faith or spirituality earlier found in people, is now nowhere to be found in this chaotic world. No matter how hard these ‘ancient women’ try, they won't be able to collect the fuel of spirituality in their empty lots.

In conclusion, both “Preludes” and “The Hollow Men” offer a cascade of modern themes such as alienation, isolation, loss of meaning, fragmented realities, and spiritual and moral decay. Through visual imagery of the dark and dingy urban landscapes, the Poet extols the decline of spirituality in modern life. Eliot paints a picture of this shabby world where humans are voiceless; they are together yet far away from one another. This reveals the emptiness and hollowness that has housed their souls. The Hollow Men are now reduced to mere shadows disconnected from their

RESEARCH ARTICLE

surroundings. In "Preludes," the notion of mundane life is described, highlighting the disconnection between individuals and their environment."The Hollow Men," on the other hand, showcases the hollow figures that embody the loss of meaning and purpose in a fractured world. Together, these works underscore a reality fractured through their filtered existential crises, where individuals are paradoxically adrift. They are physically together in a landscape yet devoid of deeper spiritual or emotional connection. Eliot's portrayal of the modern condition laments this loss of spirituality, warning the world of its serious repercussions, reflecting a world that is struggling to find meaning in the face of overwhelming disillusionment and decay.

References:

Sheppard, C.A. editor, "Preludes," *A Pageant of Poems*. Orient Longman: New Delhi, 1982, pp. 159–161.

Eliot, T.S. "The Hollow Men", *Selected Poems*. Rupa & Co. New Delhi, 1992, pp.75-80

"Dover Beach." *The Poetry Foundation*, 1 May 2020,

<https://beta.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43588/dover-beach>.

Santharam, Bhuvanesh. "Cityscapes as Detrimental Factors in the Poems of Allen Ginsberg, T.S.

Eliot, and James Douglas Morrison." *Cityscapes as Detrimental Factors in the Poems of Allen Ginsberg, T.S. Eliot and James Douglas Morrison*, Jan. 2019. www.academia.edu,

https://www.academia.edu/39312348/Cityscapes_as_Detrimental_Factors_in_the_poems_of_Allen_Ginsberg_T_S_Eliot_and_James_Douglas_Morrison.