

Psychoanalytic Reading of Decadence and Crisis in Ted Hughes' "Relic" and T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men"



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ABSTRACT: This research employs psychoanalytic methods to explore themes of decadence and crisis in Ted Hughes' "Relic" and T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men". Drawing from Freudian and Jungian theories, it delves into the psychological aspects to reveal expressions of the despair of modernity. The paper illustrates underlying psychological decay within the poems, examining subconscious motives, suppressed desires, and conflicts. Through this exploration, intricate psychological states contributing to perceptions of crisis come to light. Highlighting these literary pieces as reflections of contemporary turmoil, the poems expose the erosion of both individual and collective identities. By using the lens of psychoanalysis, a deeper understanding of the interplay between the human psyche and society emerges, offering insights into the profound implications of modern decadence and crisis. Ultimately, the application of psychoanalysis enriches comprehension of the connections between psychological intricacies and societal disintegration, shedding light on the significance of the poets' selected works.

KEYWORDS: Crisis, decadence, fragmentation, hollow men, "Relic", Psychoanalysis, Ted Hughes, T.S. Eliot, and twentieth century

INTRODUCTION

Literature often serves as a mirror reflecting the complexities of human experience, unraveling the intricate layers of emotion, thought, and societal context. In twentieth century poetry, T.S. Eliot and Ted Hughes emerge as witnesses to the two consecutive turbulent eras. Hughes' "Relic" and Eliot's "The Hollow Men" capture the essence of the two eras marked by profound uncertainty and disquiet. Beyond the mere words on the page, these poems invite readers to delve into the depths of the human psyche, exploring the interplay between decadence and crisis.

The concept of decadence, often associated with moral and cultural decline, finds its resonance in these two poems. However, a psychoanalytic approach divulges deeper dimensions of the texts, showing the underlying psychological landscapes that shaped their creations. Drawing from the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, this research undertakes a journey to illuminate the subconscious motivations, anxieties, and desires that find expression in "Relic" and "The Hollow Men".

Moreover, crises, whether individual or societal, act as a testing ground for both individuals and cultures. In the times of Eliot and Hughes respectively, there were abundant upheavals including wars, economic changes, and shifts in cultural norms. "Relic" and "The Hollow Men" express the pervasive sense of disillusionment and fragmentation that characterized their times. By using a psychoanalytic framework to explore the underlying psychological crisis, this study aims to unravel how individual minds connect with the broader socio-cultural environment.

This research undertakes a two-fold investigation: a psychoanalytic exploration of subconscious landscapes and an analysis of how these landscapes intersect with the major crises of twentieth century. Through an examination of the two works of Hughes and Eliot, this study strives to illuminate the intricate interplay between the human psyche, societal decadence, and existential crisis. While exploring their intricate poetry, this paper invites readers on a journey that goes beyond time and provides deep insights into the human experience

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Psychoanalytic literary criticism is a way of understanding literature analyzing the hidden thoughts and feelings in people's minds. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung came up with this idea. It helps readers see deeper meanings in stories by exploring what people might not even realize they are thinking or feeling. Freud's assertion "dreams are the royal road to the unconscious" (1900) highlights the significance of exploring the hidden realms of the mind. Psychoanalysis is a process that aligns with the exploration of the underlying psychological dimensions within the poems "Relic" by Ted Hughes and "The Hollow Men" by T.S. Eliot.

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DECADENCE AND CRISIS

Decadence: Both Freud's "id" representing basic desires and Jung's "shadow" symbolizing suppressed elements offer insights into understanding decadence. According to Freud, "the id knows no judgments of value" (1933), which implies that the portrayal of decadence in the poems might be rooted in the uninhibited expression of suppressed urges. Jung's idea that the shadow contains both "positive and negative aspects" (1968) relates to the complex interplay between societal norms and the darker, hidden facets of the human psyche.

Crisis: Freud's theory of the unconscious mind as a reservoir of repressed traumas aligns with the crises depicted in the selected poems. Freud's concept of repression highlights the role of crisis in shaping the unconscious. Likewise, Jung's study of archetypes and the collective unconscious (1976) offers a way to comprehend how characters in the poems struggle with existential crises tied to universal themes.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Symbolism and Imagery: Freud's view that symbols are the "fulfillments of wishes" (1900) aligns with the notion that symbols in literature often reflect subconscious desires and conflicts. By analyzing the symbols and imagery in "Relic" and "The Hollow Men" with psychoanalysis, it is possible to discover deeper meanings beyond the obvious story.

Character Analysis: Jung's concept of individuation, a process of integrating conscious and unconscious elements, is pertinent to character analysis. Jung proposed that "the conscious mind is thrown into the highest relief and revealed in all its peculiarity" during the process of individuation (1968). This idea resonates with analyzing the selected poems, revealing the narrator's inner struggles and psychological transformations.

This approach shows how literature carries deep meanings, and creates links between personal psychology and the wider social and cultural context.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND POINT OF DEPARTURE

Lok Raj Sharma's study of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" reveals the poem's profound exploration of men's spiritual void and inefficacy. In Sharma's opinion, through vivid sections depicting communication barriers, existential uncertainties, and societal detachment, the poem paints a bleak picture of modern human condition. Sharma's analysis offers valuable insights into Eliot's portrayal of isolation, materialism, and spiritual hollowness in the poem:

"This poem is perhaps the most negative and pessimistic of all Eliot's poems. It does not only reflect the paralyzed psyche of Post-World War I, but it also reveals Eliot's mental agony, the painful experience of collapsing marriage with Vivien Eliot, his skepticism towards religious hope and love." (2021)

Mariwan M Hasan's analysis of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" employs textual and reader-response approaches to reveal its themes of religion, spirituality, and modernity. Hasan highlights Eliot's depiction of hollow modern individuals and their quest for meaning in a post-World War I world. The study provides insights into how Eliot's poem serves as a reflection of societal conditions and the search for faith and morality in a fragmented era: "His concern about the outcomes of the modern time caused him to be known as the spokesperson of the modern age. He has expressed the noticeable feelings and anxieties exposed to modern man through the complexity of the modern period." (Hasan, 2019)

Dr. Maitali Khanna and Rajeshwari C. Patel analyze T.S. Eliot's portrayal of moral dilemmas in "The Hollow Men" and *The Waste Land*, revealing his insights into the societal breakdown during the wartime era. The research highlights Eliot's keen understanding of modern moral challenges, demonstrated in his poems: "Keeping in mind the disillusionment of the generation, T.S. Eliot initially wrote "The Hollow Men", to serve as an epilogue to *The Waste Land*." (Khanna & Patel, 2022)

While numerous research articles have extensively examined T. S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men", contemporary scholarly investigations have yet to delve into a comparative analysis between Eliot's "The Hollow Men" and Hughes' "Relic" from the vantage point of psychoanalysis. This void in existing literature serves as the research gap of this study.

DISCUSSION

Though Ted Hughes' "Relic" and T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" differ in style and subject, they come together in depicting mental decline, hidden wants, and twentieth century's existential challenges. The study reveals common themes and profound psychological insights found in the selected poems.

Psychoanalytic Reading of Decadence and Crisis in Ted Hughes' "Relic"

In Ted Hughes' poem "Relic", the depths of human experience and the shadows of the unconscious come to the forefront, inviting a psychoanalytic exploration of decadence and crisis. Based on the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, this interpretation examines intricate layers of symbolism and meaning, focusing on the profound interplay between the human psyche and the dissolution of societal structures.

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The core of the poem holds a jawbone, a physical object that serves as a gateway to the mysterious realms of the subconscious. The poem's vivid imagery of "crabs, dogfish, broken by the breakers" (Hughes, 1960, p. 2588, line 2) creates a powerful scene reflecting the wild sea and the chaotic unconscious. The lack of companionship in these depths shows a separation from awareness, echoing Freud's idea of the id, a place of basic instincts and desires.

The sea's unending devouring gains metaphorical meaning, reflecting the never-ending desires of the unconscious. The action of being "gnawn bare" (p. 2588, line 8) reflects the ceaseless demands of the id, forever craving satisfaction. The transformation of the jawbone into a "cenotaph" (p. 2588, line 16) evokes a poignant metaphor for the loss of identity and purpose, reflecting the ego's struggle to reconcile personal desires with societal expectations.

Furthermore, the eternal presence of the sea resembles Freud's idea of the timeless unconscious. As the sea brings ashore "spars of purposes" (p. 2588, line 13), it holds unresolved psychological conflicts that were blocked, echoing Jung's collective unconscious, a reservoir of universal symbols and shared experiences. Within this complex web, Hughes' "Relic" goes beyond just a poem—it becomes a reflection of intricate individual psychology and societal collapse, echoing the chaos and disintegration of the modern world.

Psychoanalytic Reading of Decadence and Crisis in T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men"

T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" serves as a compelling canvas for a psychoanalytic exploration of decadence and crisis. Using Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung's theories as guides, this perspective reveals deep symbolisms and psychological struggles. It sheds light on how identity breaks down and the search for meaning in a world filled with emptiness.

The two epigraphs, "Mistah Kurtz—he dead / A penny for the Old Guy," (Eliot, 1925, p. 2383) echo the sense of loss and the fleetingness of life. This fragmented opening reflects Freud's notion of the unconscious mind as a repository of suppressed desires and unresolved conflicts. The reference to Mistah Kurtz, an allusion to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), serves as a reminder of the darkness within the human soul, resonating with Jung's exploration of the collective unconscious.

The line "We are the hollow men" (1925, p. 2383) reflects the fragmented and empty nature of the human psyche. The term "hollow" can be seen as a metaphor for the suppression of authentic emotions and desires. Through a psychoanalytic lens, this can be interpreted as the ego's attempt to mask the unconscious id, resulting in a sense of emptiness and disconnection. The following lines "We are the stuffed men / Leaning together / Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!" (1925, pp. 2383-2384) express a profound disconnection from authentic emotions and genuine existence. This hollow state reflects the void-like nature of the unconscious, mirroring Freud's concept of the id—the reservoir of primal instincts that often remain unexamined and untamed.

The imagery of "dried voices" (1925, p. 2384) that "whisper together / Are quiet and meaningless" (1925, p. 2384) evokes the hollowness of communication, drawing parallels to the suppressed emotions and concealed desires within the human psyche. This notion aligns with Freud's belief in the unconscious as a realm where repressed thoughts and emotions linger, shaping one's behavior without conscious awareness.

Eliot's portrayal of "Shape without form, shade without color" (1925, p. 2384) and "gesture without motion" (1925, p. 2384) captures the disintegration of self and identity, reflecting the fractured psyche. These descriptions mirror the fragmented nature of modern identity, as individuals grapple with reconciling personal desires and societal expectations. This fragmentation parallels Jung's exploration of individuation—a journey towards integrating the conscious and unconscious aspects of the self.

The lines "This is the dead land / This is cactus land" (1925, p. 2385) paint a picture of desolation, underscoring the barren psychological landscape that the hollow men inhabit. The supplication of "a dead man's hand / Under the twinkle of a fading star" (1925, p. 2385) evokes a sense of yearning for salvation amidst spiritual decay, echoing Freud's concept of unfulfilled desires that continue to influence human behavior.

Eliot's deliberate structural choices—fragmented sections, repetition of phrases—mirrors the repeating cycles of the unconscious mind. The refrain "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper" (1925, p. 2386) encapsulates the sense of disillusionment and crisis, suggesting that the end is not marked by a grand event but rather by a quiet fade into obscurity.

Relevance of "The Hollow Men" to Modern Society

T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" resonates with modern society through its profound exploration of existential crisis, disconnection, and the erosion of identity. This haunting portrayal of inner turmoil and societal decay finds uncanny parallels in the complexities of contemporary existence, reflecting the challenges, anxieties, and uncertainties of the modern world.

Existential Despair: The "hollow men" embody a sense of emptiness and existential despair that many individuals in modern society can relate to. In a world marked by rapid changes, technological advancements, and shifting cultural norms, individuals may grapple with a loss of meaning and struggle to find their place in the grand scheme of things. The poem's portrayal of individuals trapped in a state of spiritual desolation echoes the sense of disorientation and detachment experienced by many in the face of a rapidly evolving world.

Fragmentation of Identity: The fragmented nature of the hollow men symbolizes the fractured identities that can emerge in the modern age. The widespread use of digital communication and constant exposure to various facets of one's identity, whether

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on social media or in professional situations, can result in a fragmented self-perception. Many individuals find themselves wearing different deliberate disguises online and offline, struggling to reconcile these various facets into a cohesive whole.

Communication and Connection: The poem's depiction of "dried voices" (1925, p. 2384) and "quiet and meaningless whispers" (1925, p. 2384) reflects the challenges of communication in the digital era. While we are more connected than ever, truly meaningful communication can be rare, often leading to superficial exchanges. The depiction of voices without depth illustrates the reality of virtual interactions that lack emotional richness.

Spiritual Vacuum: The references to "dead land" (1925, p. 2385) and "cactus land" (1925, p. 2385) evoke images of spiritual desolation and a world devoid of higher values. In an age marked by consumerism, materialism, and a focus on immediate gratification, many individuals may feel a void where deeper spiritual and ethical foundations should reside. The poem's portrayal of stone images and supplications to broken stone reflects the emptiness that can arise when material pursuits replace meaningful connections and values.

Fear of Irrelevance: The fear of being forgotten or becoming insignificant, as expressed in the refrain "Not with a bang but a whimper," (1925, p. 2386) echoes the anxieties of modern individuals. In a world saturated with information and fleeting trends, the fear of being rendered irrelevant or forgotten is a genuine concern for many. The poem's depiction of a quiet and unremarkable end reflects the unease that arises from the potential obscurity that modern life can entail.

Yearning for Meaning: The poem's exploration of the "Shadow" and the yearning for something beyond the mundane can be seen as a reflection of the human need for deeper meaning and purpose. In a world that often emphasizes material success and external achievements, many individuals long for a sense of fulfillment that transcends superficial pursuits. The poem's themes resonate with the search for significance in an era of rapid change and uncertainty.

"The Hollow Men" reflects modern society's challenges with identity, communication, and meaning. It explores inner struggles and emptiness, remaining relevant in a changing world searching for authenticity and purpose.

A Comparative Study of Ted Hughes' "Relic" and T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" from Psychoanalytic Perspective

"The Hollow Men" and "Relic" when analyzed through psychoanalytic perspective, reveal similar insights into the complexities of the human mind. Despite their differences, the poems intersect in portraying psychological decline, repressed wants, and the existential challenges of the poets' contemporary times respectively.

Suppressed Desires and Fragmented Identity: In "Relic", the sea's consumption symbolizes insatiable desires, echoing Freud's concept of the id—the repository of repressed instincts. Similarly, "The Hollow Men" portrays individuals as "stuffed men" (Eliot, 1925, p. 2384) with "dried voices" (1925, p. 2384), suggesting suppression of desires and fractured identity. This fragmentation reflects the struggle to reconcile conscious identity with suppressed unconscious desires.

Existential Emptiness and Crisis: Both poems explore existential emptiness. "Relic" presents the jawbone's transformation into a cenotaph, representing the loss of identity. In "The Hollow Men", the titular figures embody spiritual emptiness. These portrayals resonate with Freud's concept of existential crises, wherein suppressed desires can lead to feelings of meaninglessness and despair.

Disconnection from Society: "Relic" alludes to the sea's isolation, mirroring contemporary disconnection amidst desires. "The Hollow Men" speaks of individuals forgotten in death's "twilight kingdom" (1925, p. 2385), reflecting detachment from societal narratives. These portrayals align with Jung's concept of individuation—the quest for self-integration amidst societal disintegration.

Search for Meaning and Salvation: In "Relic", the jawbone's transformation signifies the search for meaning amidst decay, echoing Jung's individuation journey. "The Hollow Men" portrays yearning for salvation, reflecting both Freud's idea of unfulfilled desires and Jung's concept of transcendent aspirations.

Fragmented Language and Repetition: Both poems use fragmented language and repetition to mirror the unconscious's fragmented nature. In "Relic", phrase like "This is the sea's achievement" (Hughes, 1960, p. 2588, line 10) demonstrates repetition's role in reflecting unconscious conflicts. In "The Hollow Men", repeated lines emphasize how unfulfilled desires and a sense of emptiness continue in an unending cycle.

Modern Decay and Crisis: Both poems reflect modern decay and crisis. "Relic" portrays decay within the sea's depths, paralleling psychological decay. "The Hollow Men" evokes spiritual desolation and societal dissolution. Both poems offer poignant reflections of contemporary anxieties and the psychological challenges posed by modernity.

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CONCLUSION

Ted Hughes' "Relic" and T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" converge in a psychoanalytic exploration. Themes of suppressed desires, existential turmoil, and fragmented identity intertwine. Through Freudian and Jungian lenses, the selected poems resonate with modern complexities, portraying the clash of conscious control and hidden impulses. The fading of self and the search for purpose highlight twentieth century's crisis, revealing the outcomes of ignoring hidden desires. These poems offer insights into our own challenges, inviting us to explore the intricacies of the human mind, where hidden wishes and existential longings endure.

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