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Early and Late: Eliot Changes Style "Portrait of a Lady" and "Hollow Men"

Shena Salzmann



In comparing T. S. Eliot's early poetry to his later work, differences appear in terms of his style and approach to the subject matter. "Portrait of a Lady" from *Prufrock and other Observations*, 1917, is one of his first published works. "The Hollow Men" was written in 1925. In those intervening years a difference in style emerges: the images of social situations have changed into issues of society's decay; the densely packed, conversational word choices have evolved into highly controlled incantatory rhythms of repetition.

"Portrait of a Lady," like many of Eliot's early poems of social personalities, presents us with images of an individual in her little world. However, as "Portrait" implies, the poem is not a complete composite picture of the lady; instead it includes only the elements of reality that the artist chooses to portray. The title also implies a spectator, and indeed, it is the man—the spectator—who interprets our view of the woman and gives us moments from his limited perspective. This is demonstrated best by the fact that we only get a fragmented discourse as opposed to a sustained narrative. The first section of the poem begins in the "smoke and fog of a December afternoon," but by the second section, the "lilacs are in bloom." Another season passes and the "October night" returns in section three. However, by the poem's end, we find that this portrait becomes more of a description of the man's feelings and view of their failing relationship.

The turn away from narrative, albeit a fragmented one, is quite pronounced in "The Hollow Men." The division of five sections imposes some frame of order on the chaos of the "Shape without form."

The speaker is quite impersonal: we are not given physical details about

him. The ambiguous language of "death's dream kingdom"—which could be referring to life or heaven—and "death's other kingdom"—which may actually be death—makes interpretation of the speaker's thoughts difficult. However, without having the speaker wondering if he would "have the right to smile" if someone died, Eliot gives us a totally different poem which also concerns itself with a failing, with the fear of the inevitability of death. In this respect, there are certain parallels between the two. The title and epigraph, besides pointing to the themes of death, also refer to the failure of morality.

The theme of music runs throughout both poems. In "Portrait of a Lady" it becomes one of the factors of cohesion. Section one begins with cynical references to "the latest Pole" who transmits "the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips." The conversation of the piano concert of Chopin, "so intimate," "slips" to "attenuated tones of violins" and "remote cornets" as the lady speaks. When the narrative returns to the more cynical voice of the man, these beautiful, careful sounds have been transmuted to directionless "windings of the violins" and "cracked cornets." These negative qualities continue as he describes his thoughts in the musical metaphors of a "dull tom-tom," "Absurdly hammering a prelude," "Capricious monotone," and "false note." In the third stanza of section two, the woman's voice has the grating, "out-of-tune," "insistent" quality of a "broken violin." Eliot repeats "always sure," "feelings," "always sure," "feel" and "sure" to portray this whining insistence. Even the "street piano," like the man's self-confidence, is "mechanical and tired;" no longer original, it can only repeat "some worn-out common song." In section three, the music of their relationship stops: appropriately, it ends with a "dying fall."

Eliot also uses music, but more as a structural device, in "The

Hollow Men." The wind sings, but the music it makes is "distant" and

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"solemn." This poem becomes almost like an incantation with its rhythms and repetitions. By combining pieces of familiar prayers and children's songs with his own provoking verse, Eliot creates frightening music. Section five changes the familiar "Here we go round the mulberry bush" to "Here we go round the *prickly pear*" and in doing so transforms that innocent chanted circle game from childhood into a foreboding premonition of dryness and death. The last stanza fulfills this prophecy of destruction by taking nearly the same rhythms of the "prickly pear" song and ending the world:

*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.*

"Between the," "For Thine is" and "Falls the Shadow" are all repeated several times in section five to create a sense of a droning church liturgy. Eliot uses the 'e' sound to further this insistent sound: "Between," "idea," "reality," "creation," and "response" all contribute to this.

"The Hollow Men" makes the failure of language quite evident. The "hollow," "stuffed," "straw-filled" men have "meaningless" voices. Their trembling "lips that would kiss/ Form prayers" but not life-giving blessings. Their prayers are ones to tombstones which are "broken." They "grope together" but a "broken jaw" allows them to "avoid speech." Not only speech but all forms of action break down. A shadow falls between the abstract ideas and emotions and the execution of the concrete reality and responses.

Even the impulse to communicate through prayer is lost in the last section:

*For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the*

The lines just die away and as the poem ends, the world ends—in a pitiful whimper.

Likewise, the ability to communicate honestly does not appear to be a reality in "Portrait of a Lady." The poem begins in a contrived, arranged scene. Realizing that the opening scene has been "Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid," the reader immediately becomes aware that the poem operates on at least the two levels of the spoken and unspoken, external and internal. The lady and man trade roles of speaker and listener in the first section between stanzas, sharing the responsibility of the undeveloped friendship. In section two, the lady informs the man that he has no weakness, "no Achilles' heel," and that this will enable him to say when he prevails that "at this point many a one has failed." He just wants to take his hat and leave. From this we can assume that words function differently for the two of them: these words will not provide him with action, but this may be all that is appropriate for the woman. In her passivity of serving tea to friends at home, the ability to say something may be all the action which she feels is required.

She is able to use her words as effective weapons to cut through his self-possession. In section three, she says "Perhaps you can write to me" and then later insists, "You will write, at any rate." In doing so, the woman ties the man to her through this communication, and his "self-possession gutters." We find that she is not dependent on his answers and at her "when do you return?" she doesn't even allow time for his reply. For his mode of expression, this passive communication is not

enough for his repressed energy. However, he is not sure how to channel it: he can, "Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape," but at the end, he becomes doubtful about his choices. If he does what she requests and is left "sitting pen in hand" when she dies he realizes he will not know how to act because she still has control over him.

To convey all of his messages of fear and failure, Eliot uses concrete, realistic images to describe the relationship of obligation between the lady and man. The images of musical instruments, flowers, and the newspaper together shape the situation in terms of the external reality of their society. In "The Hollow Men" Eliot combines concrete images with abstract lines: "rats' feet over broken glass / In our dry cellar" differs from "Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion." The former section describes a comprehensible, understandable scene; the latter lines are oxymorons. However, the images of "The Hollow Men" do not link us with life in the 1920's in the way that those of "Portrait" do.

Eliot uses images of outdoors and open spaces in both poems. In "The Hollow Men," the "hollow valley" and various "kingdoms" suggest vastness, but these spaces are barren and void of comfort. There stands "a tree swinging" and "a fading star" dimly shines in this "cactus land." In "Portrait" the man's need for external stimulation manifests itself in his desire to escape the reality of their failing relationship and go outside—outside of the confines of the scene which "arrange[d] itself" as he wryly described it. There, they can further delude themselves in the falseness of a "tobacco trance" while they "drink [their] bocks." He suggests they "take the air" to "Discuss the late events." After she wails to him that she is resigned to "sit here, serving tea to friends," we next find him away from her stuffy place full of "bric-à-brac." He is outside again, in the park this time, reading about foreign

affairs. When he has to return to her, in section three, he mounts the stairs "ill at ease" and shows his unwillingness to confront his anxieties as the speaker of "The Hollow Men" also fears a similar confrontation with his death.

The imagery of death pervades both poems. In "Portrait of a Lady" the epigraph connects us with the deaths of a whole convent of women. The "atmosphere of Juliet's tomb" ties this poem to the tragic misunderstanding and death found in "the tradition" of Shakespeare; in the external world, a "Greek was murdered," the lady speaks of a "buried" history and alludes to her own death since she is one "about to meet her journey's end." When the young man thinks of her dead, it is at the end when he wonders how an outcome like that would affect him. However, the central death of "Portrait" is that of the faltering relationship between the two.

In "The Hollow Men" death is the dominant issue. Everything is structured around death. The speaker wonders about "Death's other Kingdom," "death's dream kingdom," and "death's twilight kingdom." "Rats," "crowskin," "a dead man's hand," and "fading" are all used as allusions to death. The "hollow valley" of section four is filled with the "Shadow" of death in section five to invoke the image of Psalm 23 which becomes twisted: the speaker does fear evil and God may not be with him. The separate lines of italicized words makes the last section murmur like a Catholic funeral service.

Between the two poems, comparisons may be drawn in the way Eliot looks at life. Eliot takes a social situation and weaves a poem of two individuals struggling in a faltering relationship to create a "Portrait of a Lady." In "The Hollow Men," the words Eliot chooses to use take on an even more vital role in the structure of the poem. The rhythms have progressed to incantatory invocations, and the social relations are

diminutive in this later poem. The concrete images have become abstracted but the specter of death remains. Both poems have the "power to communicate before we understand them," but "The Hollow Men" more than "Portrait of a Lady" reverberates its message deep within our souls.