

THE APOCALYPTIC VISION IN MODERNIST AND ROMANTIC POETRY:
A COMPARATIVE READING OF T. S ELIOT'S *THE HOLLOW MEN*
AND LORD BYRON'S *DARKNESS*

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore how both romantic and modern eras experience a traumatic change that led many writers to delve into an apocalyptic vision. T.S. Eliot (1925) and Lord Byron (1816) are among the poets who hold the apocalyptic. They reflect on the causes and nature of the Apocalypse using different tropes. On the one hand, Eliot (1925) believes that spiritual hollowness in postwar countries leads to destruction, and that the trauma of the Great War turns the European societies upside down. He employs certain images and symbols to illuminate the deadness of western culture. He further uses a fragmented style to reflect the fragmented atmosphere of post war Europe. On the other hand, Byron (1816) believes that the end of the universe comes as a result of the animalistic life in industrial societies. He implements images and symbols to illustrate his apocalyptic view. The use of melancholic mood emphasizes Byron's pessimistic vision of humanity. The chaotic form of "Darkness" indicates the chaos brought by the industrial revolution. Accordingly, by using a comparative method of data analysis, this paper demonstrates that Eliot focuses on the external perception of the apocalypse while Byron tackles the apocalyptic psychology of the traumatized people. Besides, Eliot uses depersonalization in his poems; whereas, Byron focuses on the individual subjectivity making his poems unable to reach the universal dimension.

Keywords: Apocalypse, Great War, industrial revolution, modernism, and romanticism.

LA VISION APOCALYPTIQUE DANS LA POESIE MODERNE ET ROMANTIQUE:
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Résumé : Cet article vise à explorer comment les époques romantique et moderne vivent un changement traumatique qui a conduit de nombreux écrivains à se plonger dans une vision apocalyptique. T.S.Eliot (1925) et Lord Byron(1816) font partie des poètes qui détiennent la voix apocalyptique. Ils réfléchissent sur les causes et la

nature de l'Apocalypse en utilisant différents tropes. D'un côté, Eliot (1925) pense que le vide spirituel dans les pays d'après-guerre mène à la destruction, et que le traumatisme de la Grande Guerre bouleverse les sociétés européennes. Il emploie certaines images et certains symboles pour éclairer la mort de la culture occidentale. Il utilise en outre un style fragmenté pour refléter l'atmosphère fragmentée de l'Europe d'après-guerre. D'un autre côté, Byron (1816) pense que la fin de l'univers résulte de la vie animale dans les sociétés industrielles. Il met en œuvre des images et des symboles pour illustrer sa vision apocalyptique. L'utilisation de l'humeur mélancolique souligne la vision pessimiste de l'humanité de Byron. La forme chaotique de "Darkness" indique le chaos apporté par la révolution industrielle. Ainsi, en utilisant une méthode comparative d'analyse des données, cet article démontre qu'Eliot se concentre sur la perception externe de l'apocalypse tandis que Byron s'attaque à la psychologie apocalyptique des personnes traumatisées. Par ailleurs, Eliot utilise la dépersonnalisation dans ses poèmes ; tandis que Byron se concentre sur la subjectivité individuelle rendant ses poèmes incapables d'atteindre la dimension universelle.

Mots-clés : Apocalypse, Grande Guerre, révolution industrielle, modernisme et romantisme.

Introduction

Remarkably, people, in both romantic and modernist eras, were captured by the dark spell of hollowness, disillusionment, insignificance and despair. Such prevailing sentiments make literary and visual art resonate with apocalyptic vision. As a matter of fact, the apocalypse is not a newly invented trend in romantic or modern literature, but it rather originates in religious texts like *the Book of Daniel* and *Revelation*. These texts have inspired literature in Middle Ages and continued to do so till postmodern times. Eliot and Byron are among the poets who represent the apocalyptic voice. Their poetry typically reflects a bizarre and agnostic trauma in different historical periods. Works like "Hollow Men" and "Darkness" by these two literary figures depict societies caught in a whirlpool of antagonistic interests. These particular poems indicate two varying views on the causes, nature and literary use of Apocalypse. In this paper, we are going to compare the different outlooks of these two poems in order to uncover how both Eliot and Byron conceive of apocalyptic vision thematically and stylistically.

Multiple attempts were set to discuss the issue of apocalypse and its investment in literature. Some critics contend that there are some biblical works which belong to the apocalyptic genre: *Daniel* and *Revelation*, *The Book of Enoch* and *The book of Jubilees*. Apocalypse also refers to a particular worldview which pictures the world as being full of signs of the end, and as waiting for the final cataclysm (Boer, 2009: 34-35). Other critics define Apocalypse as a genre of prophetic writing which aims at unveiling the truth about past, present, and future times in highly symbolic and poetical terms. In the religious sense, apocalyptic exhortations supply their hearers with promises of rewards and punishment in the coming "end times." The apocalyptic thought, however, does not remain confined to the realm of religion; it expands to cover a more general

phenomenon that is concerned with fear of a definite catastrophe that will end the world (Sultan, 2013:2-3; Jones, 1968, p. 226). Apocalypses are usually taken from a context of oppression, persecution, disillusionment and despair. Among the themes of apocalyptic literature: a cosmic catastrophe, a movement from an old to a new age, a struggle between forces of good and evil (sometimes personified in angels and demons), a desire for an ultimate paradise, characters in spiritual turmoil, a crisis situation, a sense of ultimate hope, and signs of an end-time (Leigh, 2008:5). Eliot and Byron are among the key literary figures who believed that their societies were on the verge of a total collapse, and they expressed their opinions by writing apocalyptic poetry. However, other authors denied the concept of apocalypse. For example, the poet and philosopher Robert Frost (1968) states that all the talk of apocalypse is a bit elitist, theorizing "We have no way of knowing that this age is one of the worst in the world's history. It is immodest of a man to think of himself as going down before the worst forces ever mobilized by God" (p.105). Eliot feels that the imminent apocalypse was a result of the decadence of civilization, and humankind's rejection of God. Most of his early poems, such as "Four Quartets", "The Waste Land", "The Hollow Men", and "Gerontion", express the despondency and the confusion of the postwar era (Bloom, 1999: 62). Furthermore, Eliot, as a witness of the social turmoil and transformation surrounding the First World War, was influenced by the modernist movement. His works metaphorically illustrate the disillusionment and pessimism of modern generations. "The Hollow Men", for example, portrays Eliot's concerns for a society and culture lacking faith, humanity and morality. He believes that a society without a religion, morals and values can no longer thrive (Sultan, 2013: 7)

On the other hand, Byron believes that the apocalyptic vision emanates from the degradation of human values and mechanization of nature. His works were written in the period of Industrial Revolution. This period brought a number of drastic societal changes and newly founded capitalist ideals. For Byron and other romantics, these changes were potentially devastating. They took part in dehumanizing and corrupting humanity in unprecedented and horrific forms. "Darkness", for example, is one of Byron's works that can be interpreted as a bleak premonition for the future of humanity. It can be read as an allegorical depiction of an inevitable apocalypse, or as an end of time characterized by the degradation of the values and hollowness of people.

1. Eliot's "The Hollow Men"

"The Hollow Men" (1925) was published in a time when Europe was suffering from the unprecedented terror of the Great War. It was a time in which chaos and nihilism spread in different spheres. As a matter of fact, the post war era was not only a time of disillusionment but also of profound mental unrest and physical exhaustion. Eliot depicts the sense of despair in many of his poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "The Waste Land" and "Gerontion"; however, the special feature of "The Hollow Men" is that it is more despairing than other poems. It is a cry of apocalypse and pessimism. The poem reveals certain themes that make it wear the cloak of apocalyptic vision: the sense of alienation, lack of communication between the hollow men, futility,

despair, meaningless existence, materialism, lack of faith, lack of responsibility and degradation of values (Bloom, 1999, p.63). In "The Hollow Men", human beings are devoid of the qualities of faith, moral strength, personality, determination and humanity. They are like empty bodies, lacking human virtues. This poem offers no redemption. It presents the unmitigated horrors of modern life. Eliot employs images and symbols which echo the deadness of sensibility, spiritual decay and emptiness of hollow men. The imagery depicted in T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" evokes a sense of desolate hopelessness and lends to Eliot's generally cynical view of civilization during this period in history. The poem purposefully does not have a regular meter or rhyme scheme in order to reveal the discontinuity and detachment of human communication. The poem is almost like a speech or a dramatic monologue delivered by a character. The technique of free verse imbues such dramatic monologue. In "The Hollow Men", T.S. Eliot uses different literary mechanisms like repetition in order to foreground and emphasize certain structures and ideas. For example, the verse 'this is the way the world ends' is repetitively mentioned. "The Hollow Men" has a very unique and experimental style. The poem is so complex, obscure, allusive, fragmented and chaotic; this makes it a very difficult poem to understand. It follows no particular pattern as a result of the usage of the cubist technique 'Collage'. In "The Hollow Men", Eliot inserts a network of abundant allusions and references, most of which are classical and religious texts. For example, he alludes to Dante's *Inferno* and other works like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In fact, the abundant use of allusions reflects the prevailing philosophies and reveals the nostalgia for the past. Eliot shifts from a place to another place, from time to time, and from speaker to other speakers without prior link. Such prevailing aspect makes the poem acquire a fragmented nature. The chaotic form is one tool that Eliot uses to express the chaotic mind of post war western generation.

The variation of voices in "The Hollow Men" is one of the noticeable characteristics of the poem. Eliot uses different personas in different narrative voices. We often do not recognize who is speaking; we just know that is someone who sounds different from the preceding voice. Furthermore, Eliot insists on the separation between the poet and the work he creates. This emphasis on impersonality discouraged many readers from seeing the poem in personal terms. In fact, the use of the objective correlative helps the poet to transcend personal situations and thus represent general crisis of western civilization. "The Hollow Men" consists of five sections of varying lengths. Like many of Eliot's poems, this poem begins with two epigraphs. The first epigraph, "Mistah Kurtz he dead," is from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Kurtz is a British ivory trader in Africa, who exploits that continent's resources. He seems to have some qualities of greatness, but in one memorable passage, Marlow suspects Kurtz of being hollow to the core and lacking morals. This epigraph indicates that Mr. Kurtz, with his focus on materialism, is spiritually dead, a hollow man. Therefore, the epigraph hints at modern people for whom Kurtz is a symbol (Bloom, 1999: 61).

The second epigraph, "A penny for the Old Guy," refers to the celebration of Guy Fawkes Day in Britain. In 1605, conspirators seeking revenge for the persecution of

Catholics plotted to explode the Parliament building. Guy Fawkes, one of the leaders of the assassination attempt, was discovered, and thus the plot failed. Fawkes and his co-conspirator were tortured and executed. The phrase "A penny for the Old Guy," is traditionally uttered by children begging money for fireworks to celebrate the occasion. Here, the epigraph mocks the hollow men who are searching for significance to their lives with such child games (Bloom, 1999, p. 60). Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is a third important source for the poem. The title "The Hollow Men" echoes Brutus's speech in which he expresses concern about the insincerity of his allies in conspiracy, calling them hollow men (Bloom, 1999: 60). Most critics agree that the opening lines of the poem refer to an emotional and spiritual 'hollowness' since the hollow men are also referred to as the "stuffed men" and have a "headpiece filled with straw". Hollow men are those who do not search for spiritual meaning seriously. This explains why their words are "meaningless" when they "whisper together". The men are a "paralyzed force" unable to move forward into the kingdom of God. They are trapped by depression and indolence, drained of any vitality (Sultan, 2013: 5).

Several locations are proposed for the hollow men. All of these places have a desolate quality with an air of broken things pervading them. The land of the hollow men is presented early in the poem as an unnamed cityscape with images of "rats feel over broken glass / In our dry cellar". The city could be any European or American city; it is unnamed to indicate its universality. Later in the poem, the "dead land", the "cactus land" of "stone images" alludes to the spiritual barrenness of the world of those who do not accept the word of God. The agony of those hollow lives is indicated by the pathetic, fragmented images of "broken stone". Gillis agrees that the poem is "thoroughly devoted to the theme of religious impotency". The desolation of these places locates the hollow men in a modern form of limbo. The hollow men fear "that final meeting" in this place of judgment because they have no relationship with God; they wear "deliberate disguises" because they fear the evaluation of their not/lives in the "twilight kingdom". There is still a gleam of hope for the "empty men". This is indicated by the symbol of the "multifoliate rose". Friedrich W. Strothmann and Lawrence V. Ryan interpret the rose as an allusion to Dante. They state that Dante, in "the *Divine Comedy*", expresses the experience of union in the mystical body by the symbol of the "multifoliate rose". The rose is the symbol of the hope for salvation. Describing the men as "empty" is seen by Strothman and Ryan as a positive attribute. They believe that: "The words 'The hope only/ Of empty men' ought to be taken in a sense that makes emptiness a condition of hope". The hollow men, perhaps in a reflection of St. John of the Cross, have become empty of all their worldly desires, and they are now ready to receive Christ into their hearts. However, Everett Gillis asserts that the emptiness of the hollow men is a spiritual emptiness. "Eyes" are an important and repeated image of spiritual insight in the poem. In Part II, the Hollow Men, unlike those "with direct eyes," have vision that is distorted. Eliot confirms the loss of spiritual values by referring to the "eyes" that have been lost entirely in the "valley of dying stars". This shows that faith that was already fading is now almost extinguished (Bloom, 1999: 62-63).

The final section of the poem is devoted to broken images and disconnected thoughts. It begins with the familiar cadences of a child's rhyme: "*Here we go round the prickly pear / At five o'clock in the morning*". The children are attempting to create meaning and order by their chant. However, throughout the final part of the poem, the "shadow" interferes to disrupt all attempts at communication, love or order. The shadow likely refers to the shadow of spiritual hollowness. The broken words of a Catholic prayer illustrate the impression of disorder: "*For Thine is the Kingdom*"; the hollow men are in such despair that they can no longer even pray. Eliot uses the hollow man as a metaphor for humanity whose mistakes of inaction and general apathy lead to destruction. The last stanza describes the apocalyptic destiny of the hollow western civilization. When Eliot speaks of the world ending 'not with a bang but with a whimper', he means that the destiny of humankind will not disappear in a spectacular way as an explosion, but in a pathetic, humiliating manner full of sorrow (Sultan, 2013, pp. 6-7). To sum up, Eliot, in "The Hollow Men", attempts to highlight the apocalyptic atmosphere that prevailed in western civilization. He describes the modern generation as being spiritually hollow. Such hollowness will definitely lead to their destruction. In order to crystallize his vision of such dying world, Eliot employs symbols and images that serve his purpose. He also resorts to certain allusions in order to enlighten the modern issues he tackles. His poem possesses a fragmented outlook since it reflects a fragmented environment. Through his stylistic mechanism, Eliot succeeds in transcending any personal opinion or historical time. His poem becomes universal and trans-historical.

2. Byron's "Darkness"

M.G. Cooke (1969) sees "Darkness" as "an obsessive nightmare of all-annihilating death [which] batters into the reader's consciousness." (p.116) He presents the poem like a nightmare, rife with images of terror and horror. He presents a world without light, a world of cannibalistic warfare and spiritual emptiness. Byron presents a vision of the worst possible end of mankind. Notably, the depressing and melancholic mood of "Darkness" stems from Byron's psychological state. During the summer of 1816, he had severe lapses of mental depression generating from his deep personal problems. T.G. Steffan (1947) sums up the problems that lead Byron to depression: The anger with Lady Byron, her family, and the lawyers, the humiliation and social opprobrium of the separation, and the grief and resentment over being forced away from his half-sister Augusta and his daughter Ada (p.130). Byron's personal life was instable after his exile from England. "Darkness" is, therefore, a product of Byron's mind during a period of intense confusion. Byron's "Darkness" (1816) has got multiple interpretations. It can be interpreted as an allegorical depiction of an apocalypse. It can be as well a metaphor for the degradation of humanity's values. It can be interpreted as a condemnation of humanity, a condemnation against the chaotic generation driven to the hell of darkness due to their reckless actions. It can be a metaphor for a society eternally doomed by the destructive forces of industrialization and the pressures of materialism. In fact, the romantic ideals were characterized by the luminescence of liberation, individual

freedom and attachment to nature. In "Darkness", Byron portrays the deficiency of romantic ideals. They are devoured by corruption, ideals of capitalism and all metaphoric forms of 'darkness' sweeping across Europe during the Industrial Revolution. The tone of "Darkness" is portrayed as black despair. Byron also sets "Darkness" as a vivid nightmare. Marchand (1965) summarizes the poem in one sentence: "Darkness pictures immitigable cynicism and the unheroic end of the last men on a dying planet." (p.128) Moreover, Lovell (1966) comments on the poem's dark tone, proclaiming that: "Byron early enrolled in the Graveyard School of poetry, and he is one of the greatest masters of the language of desolation and black melancholy." (p.254) The poem starts as a picture of a dream: "I had a dream, which was not all a dream." It is a dream, but with a real interpretation of the corruption and degradation of humanity. Furthermore, Byron shows how everything is fading and disappearing including the sunlight: "The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars/Did wander darkling in the eternal space." At first, the poem has a calm tone, produced by iambic pentameters. The use of iambic pattern contributes to creating a rhythmical progression:

I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;
Byron (1816)

Nevertheless, when the poem starts to reveal to the readers the prevailing atmosphere, the tone shifts to be rush and depressive. Byron supports this swift passage of time with blank verse and mid-line pauses, which contrast with the iambic beats of the opening. For example, in the following lines, Byron describes the death and famine on earth, which echoes the spirit of wildness, chaos and uncontrolled time:

All earth was but one thought—and that was death
Immediate and inglorious; and the pang
Of famine fed upon all entrails—men
Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;
Byron (1816)

The earth's destruction occurs rapidly in the mind. At the very end of the poem, however, Byron returns to the slower-paced and more controlled lines of iambic pentameter. The effect of this return to regular iambic rhythm is the creation of a mood like the calm after the storm; time runs down slowly to its final end. This indicates that the process of destruction has successfully reached the climax. For example:

The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,
And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need
Of aid from them--She was the Universe."

Byron (1816)

The use of enjambment and punctuation reinforces the movement of time throughout the poem. We can see an array of verses without punctuation; this makes the reading process faster from one verse to another. This denotes the rush rhythm in industrial cities. We can also notice that the verses where the punctuation is used are those where the passage of time is slower, the beginning and the end. Alliteration, on the other hand, is a poetic technique used to enhance the delivery of the macabre and bleak mood that Byron wants to communicate. For example, the use of [s] in "Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless" strengthens the growing death as we are approaching the end of times. One of Byron's strongest poetic techniques is the use of imagery. In fact, Karl Kroeber (1986) argues that "seems more excited by the image of the terrific wasteland he has envisioned than concerned with its meaning." (p. 55). The images in "Darkness" are terrifying; they provide a coherent link between the form and subject of the poem. Byron shifts the images in the course of the poem, from light, movement, and life to darkness, stillness, and death. For example, the destruction of the world is reflected in the image of fire or flame:

Were burnt for beacons; cities were consum'd,
And men were gather'd round their blazing homes
To look once more into each other's face;
Happy were those who dwelt within the eye
Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch

Byron (1816)

Moreover, Men are reduced to be animals and irrational beasts. In fact, Byron employs animal images in "Darkness" to reinforce the horror of the world's end, and to reveal man as a savage brute in the final period of life on our planet. These images aim also at describing the conflict between good and evil. The following stanza shows how Byron shrinks men to animalistic state.

The meagre by the meagre were devour'd,
Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one,
And he was faithful to a corse, and kept
The birds and beasts and famish'd men at bay,
Till hunger clung them, or the dropping dead"

Byron (1816)

In this stanza, men are shown as savages, fighting unheroically for survival. "Darkness" is a poem with a depressing, apocalyptic and catastrophic mood. This tragic

atmosphere is influenced by Byron's own depression and his cynical view of the humanity.

Conclusion

One may conclude that both Eliot and Byron attempt to convey apocalyptic flashes about the societies they live in. The two poets tackle similar issues like chaos, confusion, spiritual emptiness and a need for order; however, the dissimilar causes behind their vision lead each one of them to observe the end of the universe from different perspectives. On the one hand, Eliot believes that spiritual hollowness in the post war civilization leads to destruction. He demonstrates how the Great War is very traumatizing to the extent that it turns the European societies upside down. For further illustration, Eliot tends to employ certain images and symbols in order to illuminate the deadness in the western broken shell. In addition to this, Eliot resorts to a web of illusions and references in order to cover his poem with a cloak of fragmentation and invoke a sense of nostalgia to the tradition. "The hollow Men" is built on a chaotic form as it mirrors a chaotic state of affairs. As a matter of fact, incorporating some stylistic devices- like repetition, illusions, variation of voices, free verse and objective correlative- serves Eliot in representing the depressive and melancholic mood as well as transcending any personal view. On the other hand, Byron believes that the end of the universe comes as a result of the animalistic life of people in capitalist and industrial societies. He implements images and symbols that back up his apocalyptic vision. The melancholic and depressive mood of the poem results from Byron's pessimistic vision of the humanity. The form of "Darkness" reflects the state of affair at that time. The poem has irregular rhyme; it shifts between the iambic pentameter and blank verse. So, the form sounds chaotic just like the chaotic situation at that time. Even punctuations are purposefully manipulated in order to indicate the pace of time. Time, in the poem, slides between speed and slowness just like time in the real absurd world. Moreover, certain devices -like alliteration, enjambment and imagery- are incorporated to assert Byron's apocalyptic view. One may say that it is not difficult to change Byron's "Darkness" into a Modernist work like Eliot's poems. The vision that Byron renders is similar in a way to Eliot's modernist vision; however, the vision of Byron is related to the external world more than the internal psychology of people. Byron's setting of an apocalyptic reality is modernist in its scope. His description of the dying universe mirrors the alienation of Modernist age. Both poets reflect the fragmented atmosphere through a fragmented form. Unlike Eliot who imposes the theory of depersonalization on his poems, Byron does not succeed in transcending his subjective views. In fact, the emphasis on individual subjectivity gives Byron's poems a romantic dimension. Finally, we can deduce that if Byron had employed some techniques like the variation of voices, depersonalization, dramatic monologue, emphasis on internal psychology of people, epigraphs and allusions to other works, he would have achieved both modernity and universality.

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