



**A STUDY ON THE ELEMENT OF CONFLICT IN ARNOLD'S THE SCHOLAR GIPSY  
AND T.S. ELIOT'S THE HOLLOW MEN**

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Received: 09 /02/14

Reviewed: 11 /02/14

Accepted: 12 /02/14

**RESEARCH PAPER IN ENGLISH**

**ABSTRACT**

*This paper focuses on the element of conflict in Arnold's **The Scholar Gipsy** and T.S. Eliot's **The Hollow Men**. These poems mainly deal with the conflicts of the Victorian age and Twentieth century respectively. In Victorian age, a kind of tension and conflict existed between the 'accepted old' and 'new ideas'. Arnold portrays the conflict in the society and in the scholar in his poem **The Scholar Gipsy**. He paints it with a vivid picture of his own world's miseries and disillusionments. The conflict is not only at the social level: religion and science, but also at the psychic level: emotional and intellectual. Their dilemma to choose between the two is beautifully brought out in Arnold's poem **The Scholar Gipsy**. In **The Hollow Men**, T.S. Eliot has expressed the intellectual and spiritual emptiness of his age and also the conflicts in modern men. This poem completely mirrors the Twentieth century, where people were gripped by the intense nostalgia for a state of 'Edenic purity' which conflicts with the paradoxical search for a more enduring form of order through acts of denial and alienation. It is the modern men's inaction that leads to their conflict which is artfully brought out by T.S. Eliot in the poem **The Hollow Men**. Thus both the poems deal with the element of conflict which is deeply analyzed in this paper.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Conflict is a state of discord caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interests. Although conflict is a normal part of life itself, providing numerous opportunities for growth through improved understanding and insight, there is a tendency to view conflict as a negative experience caused by abnormally difficult circumstances. Matthew Arnold is regarded as great poet of his age. He represents the sentiments of his age. For his poetry, as Douglas Bush rightly points out, is a "record of the conflict between spontaneity and discipline, emotion and reason, faith and scepticism, youth and age". Arnold's poetry continues to have scholarly attention lavished upon it, in part because it seems to furnish such striking evidence for several central aspects of the intellectual history of the nineteenth century, especially the corrosion of 'Faith' by 'Doubt'.

The Victorian age is one of the most glorious epochs in the history of England. It was an age of Materialism. Men were replaced by machines. There were no values attached to nature and men's work. Science challenged religion. It was a great period of intellectual storm caused by scientific researches. Darwin's "Origin of Species" was a great work which revolutionized the religious thought of the age. Therefore, there was a danger of people losing faith in God and scriptures leading to a conflict between the intellectual and emotional mind. There was a kind of tension existed between the 'accepted old' and 'new ideas'. Arnold speaks about the inevitable loss of faith in his poem "The Scholar Gipsy". This poem is the expression of Arnold's analysis of the conflict of his time. This poem was written, when the material science tried to destroy people's orthodox belief in God and Providence. The poem "The Scholar Gipsy" is an elegy but not a lament for one individual. The poet widens his view to human life in general. The theme of the poem is the condition of modern life, its feverishness, its 'sick hurry' and its 'divided aims'. We hear the voice of a 'spirit crushed beneath the burden of life'. This poem reveals the growing conflict between science and religion and doubt and faith. He also portrays the conflict in the society and in the scholar. Arnold compares his world with that of the scholar. The miseries and disillusionments reveal that the place is not worthy of conflict, no one can reap the fruit of fulfillment. Arnold had realized the tension in the mind of the people and through the world of the scholar he intensifies the horrors of his age. The life of the people of Victorian age is brought out by contrasting them with that of the scholar from Oxford. The scholar from

Oxford had talents and creative imagination, but was unable to find any scope, left his Oxford friends and kept the company of the gypsies and sought to learn from them the art of thought reading.

The scholar's goal was lofty and his pursuit steady. In contrast to this is the 'sick fatigue' and 'languid doubt' and distracts of the people. The restlessness and the lingering mind of the Victorians are brought out clearly in contrast to the scholar. The scholar gipsy had one aim, one business, one desire, which was the spiritual quest. He was not born to die. Old age cannot wither him. It is all because of his steadfastness to his ideal. But the Victorians life had been a prolonged exercise in futility. They fluctuated idly without end or purpose.

*"Before this strange disease of modern life,  
With its sick hurry, its divided aims,* (Lines: 203-204)

It is very obvious that the poet's world is a place of conflicts, sorrows, sufferings, frustrations and disappointment. They were caught in the mesh of fatigue and languid doubt and suffered conflict and tension. There was a clash between science and religion in their mind. Due to this conflict in them, happiness and serenity were completely absent in their life. Depression and despair were their destiny. Thus, through the character of scholar gipsy, Arnold indicates the conflict and purposelessness of the Victorians.

Like the Victorian age, the modern age was not an age of peace. It was an age of tension and anxiety due to world wars, civil rights movement, prohibition, women's suffrage and the great depression. There was tension at different levels – political, social, intellectual and spiritual. They were deprived of happiness, peace and contentment in life. The accepted social beliefs, conventions and traditions are questioned, because of the rise of the scientific spirit and nationalism. T.S. Eliot belonged to the modern age, particularly to the inter-war period. During that period, poetry became the vital literary form and it was closely in touch with life. Poems written during that period reflect the tragic gloom and despair of the post war worlds. "The Hollow Men" by T.S. Eliot made a tremendous impact on the post-war generation. It was believed that the immediate sense of the ugliness, the emptiness and the aimlessness of man's spiritual state during post-war years was responsible for the genesis of "The Hollow Men". It expressed the sense of hopeless drift which afflicted the generation after the world wars. It centres on the emptiness, futility and misery of modern life. It is also a reflection on the problems involved

in human communication and on the meaning to life. All these hopelessness, discontent and despair in the modern man's life, is due to the conflicts in them, and their failure to find the cause and solution to it.

The two epigraphs to the poem is itself a conflict: one of heroism and the other of the mimicry of heroism.

*"Mistah Kurtz – he dead.*

*A penny for the Old Guy"*

The first epigraph is taken from Conrad's novel "Heart of Darkness". This line refers to Mr. Kurtz who was a European trader who had gone into the heart of darkness by travelling into the central African jungle, with European standards of life and conduct. He differs from the hollow men as he is not paralyzed as they are. Kurtz is one of the lost violent souls. Eliot next continues with "A penny for the Old Guy". This is a reference to the cry of the English children soliciting money for fire works to commemorate Guy Fawkes Day, 5<sup>th</sup> November which commemorates the gun powder plot of 1605. On this day, to commemorate the failure of the explosion, the likes of Fawkes are burned in effigy and mock explosions using fireworks are produced. Apparently, these two epigraphs suggest that this age is not at all heroic; the old heroes are now dead and forgotten, and if one is remembered, it is for the sake of fun.

The modern man stuck between several conflicts. The main conflict in them is their intense longing for a state of 'Edenic purity' and the contradictory search for a more lasting form of order through 'denial and alienation'. "The Hollow Men" mainly focuses on this conflict. It may also be noticed that the first and last part of the poem indicates a church service, and the ritual service. The spirit of the man, on whose behalf the poet is speaking- faintly utters the first signs of hope in the shape of spiritual regeneration. But there is also a relapse into cynicism and disillusionment, and the poem ends on a terrible note of aimlessness and futility. The mood of the poem oscillates feverishly between disbelief and intense desire for belief. This shows the idea of conflict among the modern men. The hollow men are referred as

*"Shape without form, shade without colour  
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion"* (lines 11-12)

The spirits of the hollow men have never been spiritually alive for the lack of the knowledge of good and evil. It almost corresponds to the description of those who are rejected both by heaven and hell. They are utterly incapable of action. For, their self –destruction follows not from any evil deeds: instead, they are like stuffed effigies who behave as the wind behaves without direction or aim. Being inactive, how do they feel the sense of sin? There arises a conflict. Their inability to know clearly, feel vividly and will strongly is described as 'shape without form' which suggests that they resemble beings only externally. In the phrase 'shade without colour' the poet perhaps tries to show that there is absolutely no element of life in their spiritual darkness. It is darkness caused not by an assortment of colours, but by the absence of light. 'Paralyzed force' brings out the failure of their will.

*"As the perpetual star*

*Multifoliate rose"* (lines: 63-64)

The hollow men are without any vision, unless their eyes return to the perpetual. The rose is an image of the church and multifoliate, which is a reference to Dante's "Divine Comedy", where the multifoliate rose is a symbol of Paradise, in which the saints are the petals of the rose. But

this hope is only for the empty men and not for the hollow men. Then suddenly the poet develops the reality, not the hope of the empty men, but of the hollow men, of the cactus not of the rose. This sudden change in these lines clearly shows the conflict in the minds of the people regarding their desire for belief and disbelief. Eliot speaks of the hopelessness and hope hand in hand. Though the poem ends on a note of tragic despair, there is a slight sign of hope in the body of the poem.

Thus both the poems deal with the element of conflict which is based on their inability to choose. The Victorians suffered due to their lack of faith and the Moderns suffered due to their lack of action. If there is a conflict, it is always best to become aware of its issues. It may be useful to search for a viable solution that will help some of the needs to actually be met, and will thereby reduce the need to create more conflict. But the people of both the Victorian age and Twentieth century instead of searching for a solution they clung to the problems.

Conflicts, when skillfully managed, can be of a great value to humankind. It is only the failure to handle conflicts in constructive ways leads to the despair and disillusionment of the people of all ages.

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