

MAGIC, MYSTICISM,  
AND THE SUPERNATURAL  
IN MODERN POETRY

by

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITIONS

Magic is an element in a great deal of poetry, but it is less present in Modernism, generally, than in the poetry of other eras. Modernists tend to concern themselves more with the day-to-day lives of people and the realities of the world in which we live. The poetry of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, for instance, is almost entirely realistic, or at least concerned primarily with matters of the real world. Williams's *Elsie*, and her ungainly flopping, and Stevens's *blackbirds* are worldly figures. Stevens claims that "poetry is the supreme fiction," and that "the final belief is to believe in a fiction ... [t]he exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" (Norton 236). Williams famously decreed, "No ideas but in things." The works of these two poets reflect the themes of these quotes, that poetry is the true mysticism of the world, and that the everyday and the ordinary—such as Williams's *wheelbarrow*—possess all the magic that there is to life. Their poems possess features identifiable to the common reader, and similar to features likely experienced by the reader. There exists a connection between Modernism and Realism, and what supernatural or unrealistic elements are found in Modernism are more often than not references to classical works or thought, or else those elements serve as metaphors and comparisons for real things. When these conditions are not found alongside a poem's magical elements, it is likely then that the magic serves another purpose—the realization of the unreal. It is beyond the scope of a poet to shape the world around him or her in any meaningful way with any alacrity; what changes a poet might cause are brought about by his or her writing, by influencing people and slowly shaping culture, changing policy, and ultimately designing the course of the world's development.

What a poet cannot do with the real world, he or she can instead do with a poem-world. It is relatively easy to describe a scenario in which the poet's wishes take place, but even if this scenario exists within the poem, the poet is aware that the real world remains unchanged. Here enters magic. To bridge the world-as-is and the world-as-desired, a poet might describe both, using magic as the medium to transform the former into the latter, or to reveal that the latter exists hidden within the former, ready to appear at a moment's notice, given the proper provocation. Essentially, magic is used in Modern poetry as means to subvert vicariously by proxy of poetry an unalterable, undesired reality, or to render the desired amidst the unalterable. The use of magical themes also expresses the poet's desire to change that which he or she cannot change. Among Modernists, the use of magic to subvert an undesired reality or to project a desired reality over extant reality is especially apparent in the works of T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, and can be found in the works of several others, such as Hilda Doolittle.

Sir James Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, describes magic in a macroscopic manner, and many of the traits of magic that he describes apply to the magic found in these works. It is imperative, then, to understand some of these traits and to interpret thoughtfully their impact within a work, and the implications created by their use. Magic, according to Frazer, is chiefly divided into the categories of homoeopathic magic and contagious magic. Homoeopathic, or mimetic, magic works by imitating a thing—Frazer suggests the consideration of the concepts “like produces like” and “an effect resembles its cause” (Frazer 12). These two concepts inform what Frazer refers to as the Law of Similarity, which is the first principle of magic. These thoughts are the primary foundations of such magical rituals as the use of effigies, magical dances, and symbolic actions. A magician who wishes to heal a sick patient might pretend to contract the disease, suffer its symptoms, and recover, playing out the term of illness as

convincingly as possible within a few minutes or hours. The patient is expected to sympathetically follow the magician's course and recover similarly. Contagious magic is governed by the second principle of magic, called the Law of Contact or Contagion. This principle states that "things once in contact continue to act on each other even at a distance after the contact has been severed" (12). Rituals involving Contagious magic include the infliction of harm on the belongings of an enemy, or the impaling of an enemy's footsteps, the destruction of a weapon or object that caused harm to an ailing person, and similar acts involving belonging, body parts, and other things that have been in direct contact with a target or channeled entity. Usually, it involves an object. Homoeopathic and Contagious magics are often mingled, and many magical rituals and spells involve the use of both. Generally, the contagious magic is provided by an object—henceforth "implement" or "catalyst"—that a magician uses, while the homoeopathic magic is provided by an action that a magician performs—henceforth "spell" or "ritual." A widely known example of a form of magic that employs both Homoeopathic and Contagious magic is the practice of Voodoo, of which a principle application is the use of a voodoo doll to affect a person from afar. The doll is usually crafted in the appearance of the person using personal belongings and, if possible, hair, skin, blood, or nail trimmings from the target. The practitioner then subjects the doll to whatever effects he or she hopes to inflict on the target. Shoving needles into the doll is supposed to inflict sharp, excruciating pain on the target. Similarly, holding the doll over a flame or a heated surface is supposed to cause burning sensations or feelings of extreme heat. The practitioner's mimetic actions cause the specific effect to occur, while the continuous, metaphysical contact between the target and its possessions carries these effects to it across a distance from the doll. The precept of homoeopathic magic illustrated thus far is the positive precept, called a charm. Essentially, a sympathetic charm can

be reduced to the idea, “do this so that will happen.” The negative precept is the taboo, and can be reduced to “don’t do this, lest that should happen” (22-23). Finally, homoeopathic magic can be used to “annul an evil omen by accomplishing it in mimicry” (44). If an undesired event is expected to occur, the magician can “trick fate” by performing a staging or substitution of the event and fate will decline to allow the real event to take place, as it has already supposedly happened.

Many of these magical concepts can be found in Modern poetry. In addition to these purely magical concepts, Frazer also indicates the differences and similarities found among science, magic, and religion. He asserts that magic’s “fundamental conception is identical with that of modern science; underlying the whole system is a faith, implicit but real and firm, in the order and uniformity of nature” (58.) Religion, according to Frazer, is the opposite, as it “involves, first, a belief in superhuman beings who rule the world, and second, an attempt to win their favor, it clearly assumes that the course of nature is to some extent elastic or variable...” (61). He also points out that in some cultures, some magicians were thought to be as powerful as or more powerful than gods, and in some cases even to have power of the gods themselves. In particular, Egyptian magicians are held to such esteem, as are, Frazer asserts, some Catholic priests. These assertions will help to more fully understand some of the poems of Eliot, and of other poets, such as H. D., whose poetry involves Egyptian deities. In “The Hollow Men,” Eliot juxtaposes magic and religion in the final part. As Modernism is greatly invested in the ideas of religion, atheism, and science, Frazer’s assertions can be used in a more general way to help understand the works of several Modernists.

In addition to principles of magic, magical creatures or entities are sometimes employed in poems. In particular, faeries, ghosts, talking animals, and personifications of things such as

trees, mountains, and death can be found in the works of Modernist poets. In Eliot's "The Hollow Men," such entities include the personified figure of Death, as well as the scarecrow figures used to describe the Hollow Men themselves. In Yeats, several poems include faeries or other magical figures, as well as Irish folk-heroes such as Cuchulain, whose powers were at least supernatural, if not magical. In "The Stolen Child," the speaker is a faery using its subtle magic and fae promises to lure a child away from the land of mortals. The inclusion of gods or god-like entities is common in poetry as well, such as the use of Egyptian deities in Hilda Doolittle's Trilogy, in which the ibis-headed Thoth plays a role.<sup>1</sup> Supernatural entities play as great a part in the use of magic in poetry as incantations, spells, and magical items.

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<sup>1</sup> Thoth is the Egyptian god of wisdom and writing. Some traditions of Egyptian mythology also credited Thoth with the creation of the universe.



CHAPTER 2  
T. S. ELIOT'S  
"THE HOLLOW MEN"

Eliot's "The Hollow Men" starts with an invocation of sympathetic magic before the first line. Between the title and the first stanza is the epigraph, "A penny for the Old Guy." This quote is part of a ritual involving the revolutionary figure Guy Fawkes.<sup>2</sup> Fawkes is remembered for attempting to detonate explosives in English Parliament, and every year there is a celebration on November 5<sup>th</sup>, during which his effigy is burned and a chant is chanted in memory of the event. The burning of effigies is a tradition of sympathetic magic, as the effigy is created in the image of the target, and thus imitates its form, and is then cast into a fire, in imitation of the desired fate of the target. Though immolation had no part in Fawkes's death, the burning of his effigy stands in for the burning of any who would commit treason or regicide. Eventually, the tradition lost its pro-government and anti-Catholic roots, and the effigies have come to stand for little. The celebration is now performed for the sake of celebration, and the effigies are thus empty of meaning. This emptiness causes the effigies to resemble hollow men both in their physical form as well as in their meaning, and so the epigraph is fitting.

The Guy Fawkes doll is the first effigy image in the poem, but it is not the only one. The titular Hollow Men are evidently physically hollow, as well as being figuratively so. The opening stanza describes them as effigy-like figures:

We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men

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<sup>2</sup> Guy Fawkes's plan to assassinate King James took place November 5 1605. The plan involved a large amount of gunpowder placed at the Parliament building with the intention of destroying the mostly Protestant government, and instating a Catholic head of state. Fawkes was discovered, the plan failed, and the conspirators were executed by means of drawing, quartering, and hanging. Guy Fawkes Day was originally celebrated as an anti-Catholic festivity focused on the survival of the Protestant king, but the anti-Catholic sentiments waned, and today Fawkes is largely remembered as a revolutionary figure, similar to Che Guevara. In celebration of Guy Fawkes Day, participating children wander with an effigy of Fawkes, and entreat listeners with the quote, "A penny for the Old Guy."

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. ... (1-4)

Such description, especially regarding their being stuffed and having straw in their heads, must call to mind a scarecrow, and embedded in this image is another instance of sympathetic magic and an invocation of birds. The more obvious of the two, the bird imagery in this passage exists in the inevitable association of the Hollow Men with scarecrows. A scarecrow's purpose is, after all, to ward away crows and other birds that might pick at a crop. The primary bird associated with scarecrows is, of course, the crow, and associated with the crow is often the similar raven. Both are birds related to death, magic, and the spiritual.

The association between a crow and death is mirrored by the association of famine and death in the scarecrow. If the birds are left unchecked, and the flock is sufficiently large and voracious, the crop may be ruined and the harvest stunted. With an insufficient harvest, the threats of an early winter, a lean production, a drought, and any other agricultural complication loom larger, and death by starvation becomes more likely. The association between crows and death, then, is justified in this sense, and the scarecrow is likewise justified. It is also touched by the shadow of death by way of its association with the crows, and by its interposition between the farmer's family and death by crows. The scarecrow, then, stands as a symbol of both life and death, of harvest and of famine. The Hollow Man speaker borrows from the scarecrow these traits as he walks among the kingdoms of Death and the ruined lands of men.

The sympathetic magic present in the first passage is, like the crow association, embedded in the description of the scarecrow-like Hollow Men. A scarecrow is an imitation of a man, and is supposed to scare away birds like a man. The implementation of such an imitative device calls to mind Frazer's sympathetic magic. The aim of sympathetic magic is often to

perform an act from afar, or while absent from the site of action. Additionally, a scarecrow's composition often includes items of clothing from the constructor, such as a hat, jacket, and scarf. The connection between these items and the constructor, according to the principles of contagious magic, would imbue the scarecrow with the traits of the constructor. Scarecrows are usually constructed by the farmer whose fields they are to protect, and thus such traits would include a devotion to the farm, the interest of the crop, and possibly a hatred of harmful birds. Of course, the practical side of the scarecrow's construction and implementation must also be considered. Magical or not, a scarecrow placed in a field does resemble roughly a man's figure and the use of the farmer's old clothes is practical in finishing the shape and also in avoiding the expenditure of funds to clothe an effigy made of straw and sticks. This practical consideration provides a more mundane explanation for the scarecrow, but it does not diminish the magical aspect of it. It is in the nature of man to accept as practical that which has no real value if it appears to hold a connection to success. More harmfully, it is also in man's nature to discourage as impractical the failure to uphold rituals believed to bring about desired ends, even if no rational connection exists between the ritual action or object and that end. The blending of the practical and the magical are perhaps most evident in the scarecrow, an item designed from household items and farmyard scraps to prevent damage to assets, but that does so by posing as a man to keep away the black birds of death in the farmer's absence.

The scarecrow-like Hollow Man is one of two major figures of transformation in the poem. The other is death. Death is an immaterial, inanimate thing, more realistically definable as the passive absence of life rather than as the active destruction of it. In poetry, however, death is often personified as a skeletal figure waiting to act as a chaperone for the speaker or a character. In "The Hollow Men," death is a much more intimidating figure, though it is also an absent one.

The speaker describes death in terms of its several kingdoms: death's other kingdom, its dream kingdom, and its twilight kingdom. To rule over so many kingdoms suggests that death is not only a king, but a high king or emperor, and its majesty is thus elevated. Perhaps more important is the nature of these kingdoms. None is a kingdom identifiable in the physical world; each is metaphysical or simply undefinable. Twilight is a state of meeting between light and dark, and is thus the verge between two opposites, an undefinable difference on a spectrum. Death's rule over twilight suggests that it exists between the knowable and across it, and that a man cannot truly tell at what point his life ends. Death's other kingdom, described in terms of its alienation, reminds the reader that what lies beyond death is unknowable. It is impossible to determine whether or not there exists an afterlife, and if so, what its nature might be. Death's dream kingdom is perhaps the most onerous of the three. Its rule over dreams takes away the only aspect of a man's life in which his control can be absolute, in which he can be immortal. By invading this most personal of things, death's kingdom is complete and its lordship is unquestionable. With a handful of words, Eliot has built up death from the mere absence of life into a potent, lordly entity from which the Hollow Men must attempt to hide and to which they are ultimately subject. He has created in "The Hollow Men" a mythic figure of death.

Scarecrow imagery in "The Hollow Men" is not confined to the first section of the poem. In addition to the "headpiece filled with straw," the reader is treated in the second section to the colorful description of those items which adorn the effigy. It is in this section that the connection arises between the scarecrow and dreams, as well as between each of those two and death. The narrator, coming away from the menacing eyes of the preceding stanza, remains in death's dream kingdom. He entreats,

Let me be no nearer

In death's dream kingdom  
Let me also wear  
Such deliberate disguises  
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves  
In a field  
Behaving as the wind behaves  
No nearer— (29-36)

The narrating Hollow Man expresses his desire to reduce himself to a mere scarecrow—an object to which he has compared himself already. The description is clear: the staves are crossed perpendicularly, one in the ground as a body and legs, and the other tethered across it to serve as arms. Over these staves is draped the crowskin and the rat's coat, to give the semblance of a dressed man, and the entirety of the figure is placed in the field, exactly as a scarecrow should be placed. The concept is reversed in this stanza, however. The scarecrow in reality is built up from inanimate items to resemble a man, but in this passage, a man wishes to tear his appearance down into the artificial scarecrow, apparently in order to hide, to “disguise” himself. Gone is the head—“filled with straw” though it may be—and gone are the dried voices and the whispers. Here remain only the objects and none of the elements of life. Significantly, the skin and the coat are those of the crow and the rat, and the behavior is that of the wind. Even where some traces of life remain, the human is removed, replaced instead by the animal or by the intangible wind. This removal of the human element, the reduction of this Hollow Man to a scarecrow less human than even an ordinary scarecrow, is devised in order to avoid “that final meeting / In the twilight kingdom” (37-38). “In *death's* twilight kingdom,” it might read, as it will in the fourth section. But here, while the Hollow Man avoids death, he avoids also the mention of death, perhaps in

fear of invoking that terrifying figure through use of its name, through the principle of contagious magic.

Of additional significance in this second scarecrow passage is the wind. Aside from further reducing the man into a non-man, the behavior of the wind serves a purpose of sympathetic magic. By behaving as the wind behaves, by imitating the wind, a practitioner of magic might become illusive, invisible, and powerful. The Hollow Man, out of his element in death's twilight dream kingdom, fearing his end in death's twilight kingdom, might wish to escape the clutches of the mortal harvester, and as he cannot become death's scarecrow—cannot stand in for death, and therefore be allied with death—he must instead become the wind and slip through death's fingers. The power of the tornado is one of destruction, and therefore of death, and is unfavorable to one wishing to avoid death, and so the Hollow Man must instead choose to imitate the breeze, to be “no nearer,” blowing back and forth, striving to remain out of reach. He knows, though, that he will have his “final meeting.” The Hollow Man is not the magician he wishes to be, and invoke as he might, he will soon learn the way the world ends.

It is with this meeting of death and the narrator's transformation into a scarecrow that the significance of magic becomes apparent in “The Hollow Men.” If death is a magical, lordly, monstrous entity and the narrator is but a humble scarecrow—less human even than a standard scarecrow—then any attempt on his part to resist death must be futile, whether that attempt be escape, overpowering, or circumvention. Each of these methods signifies an aspect of life that is rendered futile by its futility in the poem. The escape of death is caution, the overpowering of death is maintenance of health, and the circumvention of death is the creation of legacies—especially, in Eliot's case, the creation of poetry—to survive the creator. Each of these creates in its futility an excuse for the narrator, for the reader, or for Eliot to neglect these aspects of life as

equally futile. As Eliot described to his brother in his letters, life in England was much more difficult for him, at least early in his expatriation, than it was in the United States. “It is like being always on dress parade—one can never relax,” he wrote. “It is a great strain. People are more aware of you, more critical, and they have no pity for one’s mistakes and stupidities.”<sup>3</sup> Surrounded by critical people in a land to which he was foreign, life was not easy for Eliot. His anxiety was so great that he resembled in some ways the Prufrock of his famous poem. In such an anxious state, and under such pressure, there must always be a desire to escape, to quit. Eliot did not quit, though he struggled and fell from time to time. In “The Hollow Men,” he expresses among other themes the despair and futility endured in a life of such strong pressure. Rather than a subversion of reality, Eliot employs magic in this poem—in the forms of the personified death and the humble scarecrow—to indulge in surrender. He excuses himself for failing to live up to his own expectation and the expectations of those surrounding him, as he is but a humble man and he is up against the immortal and the impossible. In reality, Eliot never surrendered, but in his poetry, he allowed himself the escape he desired.

Death’s dream kingdom makes its first appearance in part two, and its significance is made apparent immediately. It is in this kingdom that the speaker experiences of a sort of vision and demonstrates a property of dreams. The vision, as well as another encounter—apparently avoided—are described thus:

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams

In death’s dream kingdom

These do not appear:

There, the eyes are

Sunlight on a broken column

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<sup>3</sup> *The New Yorker* September 19, 2011. p78.

There, is a tree swinging  
And voices are  
In the wind's singing  
More distant and more solemn  
Than a fading star. (19-28)

In this passage, the speaker offers three discrete threads of information. The first relates to his fear of eyes and also references Dante, the second involves divination and the power of dreams, and the third, the content of the divinations, gives the reader a glimpse of things to come in the poem. Additionally, the very use of the phrase “death’s dream kingdom” provides additional insight into the character of Death in the poem.

The first thing revealed in this dream-vision is the speaker’s fear to confront the owner of the unmeetable eyes. These eyes are the eyes of Beatrice in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, as is made clear in part four, when the eyes reappear “[a]s the perpetual star / Multifoliate rose / Of death’s twilight kingdom” (63-65). The rose is Dante’s image of the habitat of heavenly souls, and the eyes refer to Dante’s ascent from purgatory, accomplished by staring into Beatrice’s eyes. The speaker, a Hollow Man, dares not meet the eyes, and the reader can therefore infer that he must consider himself unworthy of ascension or else fear the judgment of such unworthiness from God, Beatrice, or whatever agent of spiritual migration with whom he must interact. Such shyness in the face of salvation and, by contrast, judgment proves to be thematic of the Hollow Men, who shy away from death, God, and their own intervention of destruction, and confront only stone images, and these in supplication. The speaker demonstrates the apparently self-inflicted forsakenness of the Hollow Men, as well as their characteristic unworthiness, though it



remains unclear whether this unworthiness is self-assessed or judged against an unspecified rubric.

The second revelation involves the potency of dreams and the kind of magic that can be employed therefrom. Several different powers are associated with dreams in mythology and literature<sup>4</sup>, but the most common is oneiromancy, or divination through dreams. Divination is a common magical practice in literature and myth, and perhaps the most common form of divination is the reception of prophetic visions in dreams—examples abound of Biblical figures instructed in dreams by the god of the Old Testament,<sup>5</sup> for instance. In the speaker's dream, he sees the events of the poem that have yet to occur. Earlier in the stanza, before the more obvious powers of divination, the speaker hints at a subtler, yet still potent property of the dream world. The eyes that he dares not meet notably “do not appear” in “death's dream kingdom.” This absence indicates that the dream world is a safe place for him, to some extent, as he is able to avoid unwanted conflict or contact there. This capability of dreams in the poem reflects the real-world capability of dreams to escape unpleasantness. These dream abilities—prescience and avoidance—are the types of abilities that would fulfill the wishes of a person dissatisfied with the world around him but unable to affect it significantly. Eliot's anxiety with the social situation in which he lived provides clear a motive for the desire for these abilities, and their inclusion performs a sort of wish-fulfillment for him.

The third revelation of the dream passage is of future events in the poem. “The Hollow Men” is a poem obsessed with futility, and that futility chiefly arises in the forms of the

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<sup>4</sup> Consider the various monsters that act upon a person through his or her dreams or during a dream-state. The succubus and incubus are chief among these: demons, female and male respectively, that, depending on the version of the myth, approach a sleeping man or woman, or else visit their dreams, and steal life force, the soul, or portions of the soul in exchange for or by means of sexual activity. Similar to these are night-hags and vampires, which traditionally prey on the sleeping.

<sup>5</sup> See Genesis 15, 28, 37, and especially 41, in which Joseph interprets the pharaoh's dreams.

decrepitude of man's agency and of the inevitability of the End. The End, for the purposes of this poem, is generally the ending of any and all things, and specifically of men and the world. The End is, therefore, primarily death and apocalypse. Man's agency is thoroughly degenerated through the Hollow Men themselves and is characterized by the scarecrow imagery, but the End is realized in the supremacy of death, which has already been found in the poem, and also by the inescapability of the destruction of the world. The images that the speaker sees in death's dream kingdom are apocalyptic images: sunlight on a broken column, a tree swinging, and therefore divorced of its rooted stability, distant and solemn voices in the wind, and a fading star. The broken column is a token of the ruin of man's empire, which can be found again in parts three and four; the swinging tree hints at the destruction of fertile lands, which is represented in the desert imagery of part three and five; the distant, solemn voices in the wind foretell the diminishment of men and their forlorn hopelessness as the End approaches. The fading star is more blatantly apocalyptic than any of these. The sun is a star, and the most significant source of life on Earth. Its fading, even by a relatively small portion, would bring about the end of all life on the planet, and its complete fading would likely destroy any evidence of mankind's existence. The fifth part of "The Hollow Men" chiefly concerns shadow and the end of the world. Each of the remaining portions of the poem after the prophetic scene in death's dream kingdom primarily involves death and apocalypse, and the themes of each of the manifestations of the End are found in the images in this dream.

Finally, the dream passage reveals to the reader additional characteristics of the personified death in "The Hollow Men." The realm of dreams is the place in which anyone can hide from things. It represents the ultimate security and the ultimate power, as nothing is more powerful in a dream than the dreamer can be. The fact that Death claims even this realm

indicates that Death is above all things, master of even a king in his own kingdom, of even a dreamer in his own dream. The speaker's ability to escape the eyes in death's dream kingdom makes clear by the inescapability of death and the reach of his sovereignty as an imperial figure in the poem. He may escape the eyes, but it is, after all, death's dream kingdom, and nowhere in any of death's kingdoms is death absent or avoidable.

In addition to oneiromancy, the dream magic, "The Hollow Men" features some degree of necromancy, or the magic relating to death. Specifically, necromancy involves communication with the dead, usually for the purposes of divination, but it also refers to any magic which involves the manipulation of death. The speaker describes the various kingdoms of death, especially death's dream kingdom and death's other kingdom, in terms of the familiarity of first-hand observation. "It is like this / In deaths' other kingdom," he tells the reader as he describes the way things are (45-46). This familiarity indicates either that the speaker is dead and the reader, who communicates with him, is a necromancer, or else that the speaker is a necromancer who has traveled in the land of the dead or can see across the veil. It is probable that the speaker is the necromancer, as he expresses his wish to avoid "that final meeting / In the twilight kingdom" (37-38). Such a wish suggests that either he is alive and wishes to remain so or that he is dead, but has not passed on beyond the reach of necromancy into an alienating final rest. The belief is somewhat common that ghosts remain among the living on the physical world until some criterion has been filled that allows them to move on to the true afterlife, whether their fetter is the result of a curse, an unfulfilled requirement of spiritual migration, or simple restlessness on the ghost's part. The possibility that the speaker may be either alive or dead makes uncertain the identity of the necromancer in the poem, and allows the reader to take on that role or assign it at will, and also allows a third, and equally important, option. If the speaker

is dead, then he is not the necromancer, and if the reader is also not the necromancer, then the reader must be the necromancer's client, and the necromancer must therefore be the poet. The relationship between reader and poet mirrors the relationship between client and necromancer, and Eliot here shows the reader the land of the dead. If Eliot is a necromancer, then he is elevated above death in some ways, empowering him over the most central and powerful figure in the poem and also allowing him to playact his own superiority to and immunity from death. In the spirit of sympathetic magic, Eliot, in his role as poet, imitates a necromancer, and thus brings about the desired effects of his becoming more like a necromancer.

While the contents of "The Hollow Men" account for the majority of the magical elements, the poem's form also lends it magical themes. In particular, the fifth part begins with the recitation of the popular folksong, "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush," but with a prickly pear cactus in place of the mulberry bush.<sup>6</sup> As previous stanzas in the poem have addressed, the landscape of "The Hollow Men" is a desert wasteland, and the prickly pear is therefore more appropriate. Following this recitation is the beginning of a more spell-like section, in which each stanza appears to be a verbal component of a magical ritual. The speaker mentions the Shadow, an entity, place, or thing unnamed elsewhere in the poem, which may refer to Death or one of its kingdoms:

Between the idea  
And the reaily  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow

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<sup>6</sup> An alternative version of the song, and possibly the antecedent of the more commonly known version, features a bramble bush instead of a mulberry bush. It is worth noting that mulberries grow on trees, and not on bushes. Mulberry trees being extant in Missouri, it is likely that Eliot was aware of the discrepancy.

*For Thine is the Kingdom*

Between the conception

And the creation

Between the emotion

And the response

Falls the Shadow (72-81)

The repetition of sentence portions like these is found in many famous incantations, such as in the witches' chant in Shakespeare's *MacBeth*. The speaker incants the line, filling in the latter portion with a different power or component to invoke, providing the spell with whatever power or energy it is supposed to possess. Here, the invoked elements include reality, conception, emotion, desire, and potency, among others. The ruined states of the world and of mankind engender desire, want potency, and need recreation. Their inclusion in the spell suggests that the speaker wishes for those traits to be tended to, and hopes that his attempt at magic will solve the problems relating to them.

The end of the section, and of the whole poem, returns to the folksong, reciting a variation of a different song that is sung to the same tune as the Mulberry Bush song. Commonly called the "This Is the Way" song, the lyrics include the instruction, "This is the way we wash our hands," among other common tasks and events. The speaker, after struggling with a loss of coherence and, notably, a failure to recite The Lord's Prayer, breaks down into the folksong, only his instructive advice is,

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. (92-95)

The return to the folksong caps the section, finishing the incantation. However, the interjection of The Lord's Prayer—as well as the shift in form from the stanzas between the folksong—indicates that the incantation was broken, and the spell would likely be invalidated. The change from the invocation of the Shadow and the final recitation suggests that the speaker has lost faith in both his own spell and in The Lord's Prayer, and the content of the final portion speaks of that loss in faith. Gone is any mention of desired traits in the world, or needs to be addressed, or greater powers whose actions might help the Hollow Man. Instead, the words herald futility and hopelessness. The world is at an end, and it little profits the speaker to continue to struggle against it. This futility and the end of the world fulfill escapist wishes such as Eliot may have possessed during his anxious life in England. Like the dream powers in part two, the apocalyptic imagery in part five would be helpful in allowing the poet to cope with a reality that he cannot change outside of poetry. If the world were ending, then the social problems over which Eliot fretted would be reduced in meaning to almost nothing, or would even cease to exist. At the least, he would be excused for ceasing to practice any social conventions that might trouble him, or for failing to conform to standards. In this way, the speaker may stand in for an Eliot whose wishes to be exempt from such nervous business can be fulfilled by the destruction of the world.

The significance of the juxtaposition between The Lord's Prayer and the recitation of the speaker's version of "This Is the Way" lends to the poem a rather dark aspect. The Lord's Prayer is invoked by a Hollow Man, who has already witnessed the breadth and potency of death, who

has traveled in the blasted wasteland, who has seen the empire of man crumble. He has experienced the inefficacy of idolatry, in the form of the unresponsive stone images, which “receive / The supplication of a dead man’s hand / Under the twinkle of a fading star” (41-44). At the end of the poem, he invokes the Judeo-Christian god through the most well-known and arguably most important prayer in the Bible. Even this invocation fails, leaving the Hollow Man more hollow than before, as his coherency falls apart, his prayer disintegrates, and his final recitation is a warped nursery rhyme that betokens the End from which he has hidden or fled throughout the preceding lines of the poem. Similarly, the insertion of the line “*For Thine is the Kingdom*” between stanzas invoking the Shadow creates a juxtaposition perhaps more compelling between god and death. The wasteland is clearly the domain of death, as has been established in preceding stanzas, and the local sovereignty of the personified Death is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in part five, in which The Lord’s Prayer proves powerless amidst this magic spell.

Additionally, the final line refers back to Guy Fawkes, with whose immolation the poem began. The “bang” refers to the explosion of gunpowder that his party expected to employ in their plot against Parliament, and the whimper is Fawkes’s supposed whimper during his torture and upon his death. The completion of the poem with the same imagery as the beginning epigraph achieves a circular closure of “The Hollow Men,” which is appropriate, as the circle is a ubiquitous element of magic and mysticism. The concept of indistinguishable beginnings and ends is found in the Ouroboros symbol, which consists of a serpent form a circle by eating its own tail, and in the widely known protection circles used in many different forms of occult magic. The pentagram, perhaps the most widely known of all magical symbols in the West, consists of two shapes that are both without visible beginning or end—a star and a circle.

Though this poem's beginning and ending are clear, its invocation of the same effigy figure at the beginning and end lend to it a sense of closure that resembles in a way the continuity of the Ouroboros and the pentagram.



### CHAPTER 3 WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

William Butler Yeats is an early Modernist, and a poet whose fascination with the supernatural spanned much of his career. A great deal of his earlier poetry involves faeries, magical spells, and elements of Irish folklore. Among the latter category, Yeats's works feature prominently the mythic hero Cuchulain and the Sidhe<sup>7</sup>, the spirits responsible in Irish folklore for many events and tendencies of the supernatural world. Yeats and his wife engaged in automatic writing, a practice in which participants write phrases and answers as directed by a perceived spirit guide or other supernatural entity, often a dead person. Late in his life, Yeats would reject much of the spiritualism of his youth, but his poetry, especially that of his youth, was filled with the supernatural and mythological themes and entities. His beliefs, according to George Mills Harper, "did not follow the logical flight of the hawk, but rather the intuitive flight of the butterfly" (Mills 2).

One of the most magically-involved of Yeats's poems is "The Cap and Bells." The basic narrative of the poem—a jester's attempt to win the attentions of a young queen—is described as a series of spirit-projections performed by the jester. The first two projections are metaphysical in nature. Especially supernatural is the jester's first offering, of his straight-and-blue-garmented soul:

The jester walked in the garden:

The garden had fallen still;

He bade his soul rise upward

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<sup>7</sup> Pronounced similar to "banshee," a name which descends from "bean-sidhe." One of the Irish Sidhe, the banshee is a spirit which wails for those whose imminent deaths it has foreseen. The Sidhe are essentially faeries, and especially include those faeries who operate in troops, or courts, and are thought to be less harmful than lone faeries and also more aloof.

And stand on her window-sill.

It rose in a straight blue garment,

When owls began to call;

It had grown wise-tongued by thinking

Of a quiet and light footfall; (1-8)

The soul is of utmost importance in most religious and supernatural practices, as it is the basic essence of a person, and it is most commonly the part of a person to move on to the afterlife in traditions concerned with life after death. The soul is the part of a person that is immortal. The willingness to offer his soul to the queen, and to furthermore offer it before any other offerings, indicates that the jester is wholly committed to her on a level that exceeds the natural or physical.

The manner in which the jester presents his soul to the queen is significant in its presentation of power and separation of powers. By bidding his soul to rise upward to the queen's window, the jester frees it from physical manipulation and indeed from contact with the physical—and therefore baser—parts of him. Additionally, by keeping himself at a distance from the queen, he shows deference to her, by declining to approach her without being beckoned. Paradoxically, he also demonstrates a degree of superiority by declining to deal with her in-person, and choosing instead to send to her his soul as a merchant might send an item to a customer. In a similar paradox, the distance at which he conducts this ritual keeps him relatively safe even while he risks his most precious asset. The most obvious of the paradoxes inherent in the jester's gift-from-a-distance is in his implicit desire to be near the queen even while offering his gift from a distance.

The time at which the jester chooses to project his soul carries a different significance. He chooses to offer this supernatural gift “when owls began to call,” and he waits to offer the more physical gift of his heart until the time “when the owls called out no more” (15). The significance of the owl, then, is tied to the non-physical, as its presence facilitates the projection of the meta-physical soul, but fails to aid—or perhaps even hinders—the transfer of the physical heart. The owl traditionally signifies wisdom, and jesters in literature are often among the wisest characters—though they often are also paradoxically called “fools.” In many works, such as Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the jester outwits the nobility with whom he interacts. In “The Cap and Bells,” the jester does not outwit the queen, but he does win the queen’s heart, presumably without the king’s knowledge. Unfortunately for the jester, however, his advances remain unmet until after his death. After parting from the queen, the jester decides on a plan to gain her attention:

‘I have cap and bells,’ he pondered,  
‘I will send them to her and die’;  
And when the morning whitened  
He left them where she went by. (21-24)

His plan succeeds. The queen gathers the cap and bells and “[sings] them a love-song / Till stars grew out of the air” (27-28). Finally, that night, she accepts the red heart and blue soul, and they fly through the window and into her hands. The physical token of the cap and bells finishes the jester’s ritual, resulting in the achievement of his desire. This final act carries three key implications. The first is that the physical token is the jester’s magical implement, akin to a sorcerer’s wand or staff, and it is by its use as a catalyst that he is able to finish the spell. Once he channels the magic through the physical item, it becomes able to affect the physical world and

any mortal entity residing therein. This change finalizing the spell and allows him to charm the queen. The second implication is that the cap and bells, removed from the jester and placed in a location where the queen would find them, served as a token of the jester's devotion and deference and it was this sign that moved the queen's emotions. Finally, the cap and bells, vital to the jester's trade, and therefore to his livelihood, indicated by their removal from his person the similar removal of his life. His willingness to die for the queen secured his place in her heart.

The events of "The Cap and Bells" reflect certain events in Yeats's life, and their resolution here differs from the resolution of the events in reality. The unalterable reality that Yeats subverts through magic in this poem is his relationship with Maud Gonne, a political activist in the movement to liberate Ireland and the object of Yeats's love in his youth. Yeats courted her unsuccessfully for a number of years, facing rejection after rejection, until she finally married Major John MacBride, quashing Yeats's hopes of marrying her (Norton 93). The relationship between the queen and the jester resembles that of Gonne and Yeats. She, a queen, is beyond the scope of the lowly jester, just as the famous Maude Gonne, prominent leader of the Irish separatism movement, proved to be unreachable to Yeats. It is not made clear in the poem whether or not the queen is married to a king, or, if such is the case, whether she was within a class approachable to the jester prior to marriage, and the thus the relationship in the poem cannot serve as a complete allegory for the situation, but the similarities are nevertheless strong. Both the jester and Yeats are entertainers of a sort and Gonne's position in the Irish nationalist movement, as well as her marriage to the similarly prominent MacBride, casts her as a queenly figure. Unlike with Yeats, however, the jester changes his misfortune. The jester dies in order to achieve these events, though, and as he stands in for Yeats in this poem, his death may indicate that Yeats valued the coveted love of Maud Gonne above his own life.

The sympathetic and contagious magic found in “The Cap and Bells” is not the only sort that Yeats employs. In addition to such human sorcery, his works feature certain supernatural entities of Irish/European folklore and mythology. Of particular interest among these are the faeries. Faeries are often considered in the modern world to be beneficent characters and lovers of fun and mischief, like Puck in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or J.M. Barrie’s Tinkerbell, but in the folklore of people who believed in the existence of faeries, it is not always so. Sometimes a faery is indeed harmless and amusing like Puck, but at other times, it is dangerous and possessed of strange, unknowable, and powerful magic, as well as equally strange and unknowable designs and desires. The most dangerous element of faeries is that a faery that is at one moment like Puck might in the next moment become sinister, and that such a change is natural, almost inconsequential, to the faery, akin to a change of mood. Such a faery is found in Yeats’s “The Stolen Child,” and it is also perhaps the poem in which the subversion of the unalterable undesired world is clearest. This poem, part of Yeats’s *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, presents the seductive arguments of a fae creature attempting to convince a child to join it and the other faeries. Three of the four stanzas follow a pattern in which the faery describes the sublime elements of its homeland, then describes the pleasurable activities in which the faeries partake in this land, and finally mentions some unpleasant aspect of the human world with which such wonders contrast favorably. The final stanza breaks from this pattern, describing instead the departure of the human child with the successful faery. Each stanza ends with the same refrain in which the faery reiterates its entreaty:

Come away, O, human child!

To the woods and waters wild,

With a fairy hand in hand,

For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand. (9-12)

These lines characterize in miniature several themes of the poem, including magic, seduction, escape from reality, and, more subtly, excuses. The last of these themes requires some justification. Faeries, being supernatural, immortal entities are beyond logic and tend to behave in many tales and poems in ways that defy understanding and appear to lack reason, though they also tend to adhere strictly to their own often arbitrary and sometimes nonsensical rules of behavior. This faery, therefore, does not require an explanation for the abduction of a child, but provides one nonetheless. A possible explanation for this is that the child requires an explanation for leaving home, and the faery is providing one in order to reduce willful resistance from the child, or else to improve the efficacy of the spell by removing guilt, anxiety, or longing, any of which could serve as a fetter to the physical world. The presence of magic in this passage is more obvious. A faery is a magical creature, and by walking with one hand-in-hand, the child takes in hand a magical entity and also a representation of magic itself. The desire to grasp the supernatural, particularly as powerful an agent of change as magic, is characteristic of a disinclination for the world as-is; it is characteristic of a person who wishes to recreate the world according to his or her wishes but knows that such change is beyond his or her ability. The theme of seduction is perhaps the easiest to identify in this passage. The foremost theme of the poem is the faery's attempt to convince the child to abandon its home in favor of the fey realm, and this appears in the repeated quatrain in the form of contrast between the favorable ideal of the waters and the wild and the unfavorable situation of the world's weeping. The promise of improvement should the child follow the faery and the highlighting of the flaws of the real world is a simple attempt to seduce the child away from home. This same contrast also informs the theme of escape from reality. The dream of leaving behind the often incomprehensible woes of normal life

in human civilization in favor of the “woods and waters wild” is common, if not constantly present in those who fantasize about living a simpler life. Thoreau chronicles his successful attempt at such an escape in *Walden*, though his description of the woods and lake did not include faeries. The desire to escape to fey lands is a more extreme dream than the desire to live simply in the woods, but it is not fundamentally different. Each of these themes is present in a compressed form in these four lines, and is more expanded throughout the rest of the four stanzas.

The repeated lines also lend to the poem a subtext of subverted reality by means of its form. The repetition of the same four lines serves appropriately as a sort of incantation, or chanted magical spell. In a poem about faeries and magical lands, such repetition—normally cumbersome and perhaps aesthetically unpleasant—takes on a new aspect: it becomes a sort of chant that makes the poem resemble a magic spell that a faery might cast in order to gain dominance over a human. The reader might imagine, then, that the very poem that he or she is reading is also being recited by a faery by the bedside of a sleeping child moments before leading the child away to Faery, and this event having been caused by the recitation itself. This incantation aspect of the poem serves its own function in the attempt to subvert unpleasant reality by providing what appears to be a possible magical implement. The reader is able to imagine that the poem is a real magical spell and that, with the right wizardly or faery powers, it might be usable to alter the otherwise unalterable, to escape an unwanted reality. This aspect also carries the implication that Yeats is a master wizard, as he created the spell, and is thereby elevated over other users, faery and human, who might invoke his wizardry.

Magic often serves as a means of escape from reality, and that service is performed in “The Stolen Child” by the contrast between the pleasant, alluring world of the faeries and the

complicated, sorrowful world of mortals. The child is offered a visit to a “leafy island” where the faeries have hidden “[their] faery vats, / Full of berries / And of reddest stolen cherries” if he should decide to leave a world that is “more full of weeping than [he] can understand” (3-12). As is often the case in escape fantasies, only the positive elements of the desired retreat and the negative elements of the undesired home are present in the contrast. The faery avoids mentioning things that are native to a human environment that might promote feelings of happiness, comfort, or longing and also leaves out any hint of the alien or the unknown that accompany a departure from home. Yeats’s intelligence and maturity as an adult prohibits him from making decisions based on biased reasoning that considers only the best traits of one option and the worst of the other, but in his poem, he can indulge in such bias through the arguments of the capricious faery. Through the faery speaker, Yeats and the reader can avoid stooping to unreasonable bias and still enjoy longing for the pleasures of “Weaving olden dances, / Mingling hands and mingling glances” while decrying a “world [which] is full of troubles / And is anxious in its sleep” (17-23).

Despite the escapist elements of this poem, the final stanza offers a plaintive look back on the positive elements of the world that the faery-led child will presumably find himself missing after his departure. Each of these elements—namely the lowing of cattle, the whistling of a kettle, and the furtive dancing of mice—is a small comfort, but one that is easily recognized, and each is realized masterfully here. Embedded in this stanza is the notion that sometimes, the things from which one is most eager to escape will later become the things to which one most desires to return. It is here that the sinister nature of the faery becomes evident. Not until the child has already become snared does the fae creature allow hints of the negative aspects of life—or perhaps more accurately, captivity—in the world of Faery. The abduction of a child is a



common theme among faery tales<sup>8</sup>, and the life of the abductee is generally less pleasant than believed beforehand. Similarly, the escapist fantasy, when fulfilled, often turns out to be no better than the life left behind, if not significantly worse. In “The Stolen Child,” Yeats presents among other themes the struggle between coping with a life that one cannot change to meet one’s desires and yearning for a perfect, magical world. Simultaneously, he considers the more realistic risks of fleeing from such an unwanted life for an unknown fate. A common element of the faery abduction tale that Yeats does not include in “The Stolen Child” is the changeling, or the thing left behind in place of the child. Typically, a faery who kidnaps a human child leaves in its place a simulacrum to placate the parents so that they will not search for their missing child. The function of a changeling might serve as an analogue for the desires of a person wishing to escape to have his or her tasks and responsibilities handled in his or her absence. Yeats’s decision to leave out the changeling suggests that he would rather, in his escape fantasy, cut all ties to the life he wishes to leave behind—to abandon it completely.

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<sup>8</sup> Consider Rumpelstiltskin, a faery who threatens to steal a woman’s child unless she can guess his name. When she succeeds, he tears himself in half in a rage.

## CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION

The magical elements in Eliot's "The Hollow Men" and in the poems of Yeats perform the function of subverting the parts of reality that the author or speaker find undesirable yet are unable to change. These elements, like the magic that they invoke, enable them to manipulate the world of their poems, simulating changes in reality that that normal, mortal people cannot make. It allows them to become wizards in their own microcosms.

In "The Hollow Men," the speaker foresees the future using his dream-magic, and speaks to the dead or from death using his necromancy, and the personified Death embodies a spirit of futility that allows the speaker and Eliot to indulge in a defeatist fantasy and release for a time their burdens and responsibilities under the name of helplessness and inefficacy. Religion and magic juxtapose in the final part, in which The Lord's Prayer stutters and weaves through an incantation-like chant heralding the end of the world.

In "The Cap and Bells," a jester utilizes sympathetic magic and contagious magic, and uses as well the soul as an instrument, to overcome the barrier between royalty and the serving class and win the affections of the queen, who stands in for the distant Maud Gonne, object of Yeats's affection and the closest thing to a queen in the Irish Resistance movement. The faery in "The Stolen Child" enables an escapist fantasy for Yeats in which he can uproot and depart for more inviting lands, heedless of the dangers or of any logical argument against such an escape.

Other Modernist poets who employ magic, magical creatures, or magical elements in their poetry include the following: Hilda Doolittle, whose *Trilogy* includes Egyptian deities and religious magic; Auden, who writes about Shakespeare's spirit, Ariel, in his poems about *The Tempest*; and Hart Crane, whose poem "Medusa" includes the Greek monster of the same name,

a gorgon, with snakes for hair and whose gaze can transform a viewer into stone. Even poets whose work is definitively realistic, whose matters are those matters that real people encounter every day, occasionally dabble in the magical, or include some mystical or supernatural element.

Wallace Stevens, for instance, includes a brief scene in “Sunday Morning” of the occult:

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men  
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn  
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,  
Not as a god, but as a god might be  
Naked among them, like a savage source.  
Their chant shall be a chant of paradise  
Out of their blood, returning to the sky ... (91-97)

The majority of the poem is realistic, containing no magic or occultism, but this portion stands out, especially in the work of the secular, earthly Stevens.

Modernist poetry has many realistic agendas, but there remain elements of the magical in many places. In some cases, the magic is referential, looking back to the poets preceding Modernism, while in others, magic is used in new ways, to explain, subvert, change, or for no reason other than for the enjoyment of the poet and readers. Its uses differ according to the personality and agenda of the poet employing it, and its impact differs from reader to reader, but magic always opens a way for the unexplainable and touches a part of the social conscious that looks beyond what the eyes can see.

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