



# Two Visions of Emptiness: A Comparative study of T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*

Anshika Sahani, Dr. Kum Kum Ray

Department of English, Amity University, Lucknow, India

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**Abstract** — This paper examines representations of spiritual emptiness and alienation in *The Hollow Men* and *Taxi Driver*. Situating the works within post-World War I Europe and post-Vietnam America, it analyses how fragmentation, repetition, and disrupted continuity shape experiences of existential dislocation. Through a comparative literary and cinematic approach, the study argues that emptiness operates not only as a theme but as a structural condition embedded in both texts, reflecting the instability of modern experience.

**Keywords** — Alienation, Existential Crisis, Fragmentation, Modernity, Spiritual Emptiness



## I. INTRODUCTION

Modernity is frequently celebrated as an era of progress, technological expansion, and innovation. Yet beneath this narrative lies a persistent sense of instability that reshapes both social structures and inner life. The twentieth century witnessed not only rapid industrial and urban development but also a gradual erosion of religious certainty, communal cohesion, and moral clarity. In such a context, individuals often appear disoriented, immersed in activity yet detached from meaningful frameworks of belief. Literature and cinema, rather than resolving this condition, frequently dwell within it, exploring the consequences of living in a world where meaning has become uncertain.

Within this broader framework, *The Hollow Men* by T. S. Eliot and *Taxi Driver* directed by Martin Scorsese offer two distinct yet deeply connected representations of modern emptiness. Eliot's poem emerges from the aftermath of the First World War, a moment marked by cultural disillusionment and spiritual fatigue. Scorsese's film, produced in the context of post-Vietnam America, reflects a different yet comparable crisis characterized by political distrust, urban decay, and psychological fragmentation.

Despite differences in medium and historical context, both works engage with a shared concern: the fragmentation of the modern self and the collapse of stable systems of

meaning. Eliot's hollow men inhabit a barren, shadowed landscape where intention fails to become action, while Travis Bickle navigates a crowded yet isolating city that mirrors his internal dislocation. In both cases, alienation extends beyond social isolation to encompass a deeper spiritual and existential condition.

This study adopts a comparative approach to examine how literary and cinematic forms construct emptiness through distinct aesthetic strategies. By analysing poetic fragmentation alongside cinematic subjectivity, it argues that emptiness is not merely thematic but structural, embedded in form, language, and perception. In doing so, the paper highlights the continuity of modern alienation across time, demonstrating how the crisis articulated in early modernist literature persists in later cultural expressions.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The twentieth century repeatedly confronts the problem of diminishing meaning in a rapidly changing world. Across literature, philosophy, and cinema, the modern subject is depicted as fragmented and alienated, shaped by industrial modernity, war, urbanization, and the decline of shared belief systems. In response, artistic forms adopt fragmentation, repetition, and silence as formal strategies,

making absence both a theme and a structural condition. While the works of T. S. Eliot and Martin Scorsese are central to discussions of modern alienation, they are rarely examined together.

Critics of *The Hollow Men* consistently read it as an expression of spiritual paralysis. F. R. Leavis links Eliot's poetry to a decline in moral conviction, while Cleanth Brooks emphasizes its fragmented structure as an embodiment of spiritual exhaustion (Leavis, 1932; Brooks, 1939). Theological readings by Helen Gardner and Hugh Kenner situate the poem in a liminal space between belief and disbelief, where redemption is desired but unattainable (Gardner, 1949; Kenner, 1959). Later critics such as Terry Eagleton and Maud Ellmann extend this analysis by connecting Eliot's imagery and language to broader cultural instability and absence (Eagleton, 1983; Ellmann, 1987).

In contrast, *Taxi Driver* has been examined primarily within film and cultural studies. Robert Kolker interprets the film as a study of urban alienation, while Robin Wood highlights its moral ambiguity (Kolker, 1988; Wood, 1986). Foster Hirsch emphasizes cinematic techniques, voice-over, framing, and sound, that immerse viewers in the protagonist's fragmented consciousness (Hirsch, 2001). Paul Schrader's concept of transcendental style further reveals how the film expresses distorted spiritual longing, where the desire for moral order collapses into violence (Schrader, 1972).

Despite extensive scholarship, comparative analysis between these works remains limited. Eliot's poem is often read through theological frameworks, while Scorsese's film is approached through psychological or socio-political lenses. This study addresses that gap by examining emptiness as a shared structural principle, arguing that both poetic fragmentation and cinematic subjectivity construct it as a persistent condition of modern consciousness.

### III. MODERNITY, FRAGMENTATION, AND THE EXPERIENCE OF EMPTINESS

Modernity is often associated with progress and technological advancement; however, it also produces instability in systems of belief and meaning. The twentieth century reshaped social, political, and urban life while weakening religious authority, moral certainty, and communal cohesion. As a result, previously stable structures of meaning became uncertain, leaving individuals navigating environments characterized by movement without coherence and connection without clarity (Weber, 2001).

Urbanization intensified this condition. Industrial cities offered new opportunities but also fostered anonymity and emotional detachment. Social relations became increasingly

impersonal, and labour grew more specialized and disconnected from meaningful fulfilment. In this context, alienation emerged as a lived experience, reflecting a growing divide between individuals and their social and existential realities (Marx, 1988). This widening gap between intention and fulfilment contributed to a pervasive sense of emptiness.

The First World War further deepened this crisis by undermining faith in progress and rational order. The scale of destruction revealed the fragility of civilizational ideals, prompting artists to question traditional forms of representation. Modernist literature responded by adopting fragmentation, repetition, and ambiguity as formal strategies to represent a fractured reality. Rather than restoring coherence, these texts dwell in suspension, where emptiness manifests as hesitation, incompleteness, and deferred meaning (Lukács, 1971).

This condition persists in later cultural forms often associated with postmodernity, characterized by the instability of identity and the collapse of overarching narratives (Lyotard, 1984). Rather than marking a rupture, postmodernism extends the concerns of modernism, reconfiguring fragmentation within new cultural and technological contexts (Jameson, 1991).

Cinema plays a crucial role in expressing this evolving condition. Through techniques such as constrained framing, repetition, silence, and voice-over narration, film translates internal dislocation into sensory experience. The modern city, in particular, becomes a central site of fragmentation, crowded yet isolating, dynamic yet disorienting. In such representations, emptiness is not explicitly stated but constructed through aesthetic form (Deleuze, 1989).

This historical and theoretical framework provides the foundation for analysing how literary modernism and urban cinema articulate emptiness as a structural feature of modern experience.

#### 3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three interconnected concepts: modernity as historical rupture, alienation as structural condition, and emptiness as both spiritual and aesthetic experience. Max Weber's concept of disenchantment explains the erosion of spiritual coherence in modern society, where rationalization displaces traditional belief systems (Weber, 2001). This shift provides a key context for modernist literature.

Georg Lukács argues that modern art reflects a fragmented reality in which unity can no longer be assumed, thereby embedding historical disintegration within form (Lukács, 1971). Similarly, Karl Marx's concept of alienation describes the detachment of individuals from labour,

society, and self, extending beyond economic critique to cultural and psychological estrangement (Marx, 1988).

Postmodern theorists further develop this framework. Jean-François Lyotard identifies a decline in grand narratives, while Fredric Jameson emphasizes fragmentation and loss of depth in late twentieth-century culture (Lyotard, 1984; Jameson, 1991). These perspectives suggest continuity rather than rupture between modernism and later cultural forms.

Film theory clarifies how cinema represents this condition. André Bazin highlights realism as a means of preserving ambiguity (Bazin, 1967), while Christian Metz explains how identification with the camera produces subjective experience (Metz, 1982). Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "time-image" describes a cinematic mode where action no longer leads to resolution, resulting in suspended narratives and psychological uncertainty (Deleuze, 1989).

Together, these frameworks support the argument that emptiness functions not only as a theme but as a structural principle. In literature, it appears through fragmentation and disrupted language; in cinema, through subjective narration, visual confinement, and narrative suspension. Emptiness thus emerges as a persistent condition of modern consciousness across artistic forms.

#### IV. SPIRITUAL DESOLATION IN *THE HOLLOW MEN*

Written in the aftermath of the First World War, *The Hollow Men* reflects a profound crisis of belief and moral certainty. The devastation of the war undermined faith in progress, rationality, and divine order, producing a climate of spiritual disillusionment. Within this context, T. S. Eliot presents not a dramatic collapse but its aftermath, a world where belief has diminished and spiritual vitality has weakened. The poem opens with a striking paradox: "We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men" (Eliot, 1925/1952). These figures appear outwardly formed yet internally empty, suggesting a condition of spiritual depletion. The collective voice emphasizes that this emptiness is not individual but cultural and generational. Their speech, "quiet and meaningless" further reflects linguistic exhaustion, where language persists but no longer carries conviction (Eliot, 1925/1952).

The landscape mirrors this inner desolation. Repeated references to barrenness and dryness, "This is the barren land" evoke a world devoid of renewal, reinforced by the absence of water as a symbol of spiritual regeneration (Eliot, 1925/1952). This imagery establishes emptiness as both physical and metaphysical, where survival replaces growth. Formally, the poem embodies this condition through fragmentation and repetition. The recurring lines

"Between the idea / And the reality" articulate a state of suspension, where intention fails to translate into action (Eliot, 1925/1952). This structural incompleteness reflects both psychological hesitation and spiritual stagnation. Similarly, the fragmented rendering of prayer, "For Thine is / Life is" suggests that faith persists in memory but collapses in articulation, indicating the erosion of spiritual continuity.

Motifs such as the absence of "eyes" further intensify this disorientation, symbolizing the loss of guidance and recognition. The hollow men exist in a liminal state, described as "Shape without form," suspended between life and death, belief and disbelief (Eliot, 1925/1952). This in-between condition reinforces the poem's central theme of unresolved existence. The poem's rhythmic structure, marked by pauses, repetition, and incomplete lines creates a sense of stagnation. Its conclusion, "Not with a bang but a whimper," encapsulates this subdued collapse, where decline replaces dramatic resolution (Eliot, 1925/1952). Rather than offering catharsis, the poem ends in exhaustion and ambiguity.

Despite this desolation, traces of longing persist. The hollow men recall faith and gesture toward transcendence, yet remain unable to realize it. Emptiness thus emerges not as complete nihilism but as a condition of suspended desire. Through imagery, structure, and language, Eliot constructs spiritual desolation as both a thematic concern and a formal principle, reflecting the instability of modern consciousness.

#### V. ALIENATION AND THE URBAN VOID IN *TAXI DRIVER*

Released in 1976, *Taxi Driver* reflects the disillusionment of post-Vietnam America, marked by political distrust and urban decay. Within this context, Martin Scorsese constructs a psychological exploration of alienation, where the protagonist, Travis Bickle, inhabits a world devoid of stable meaning (Scorsese, 1976). The film's opening sequence establishes the city as an extension of Travis's inner turmoil. Through neon-lit streets, drifting camera movement, and voice-over narration, viewers are immersed in his fragmented consciousness. His perception of the city as corrupt reflects both moral anxiety and psychological projection. Insomnia further intensifies this condition, symbolizing his inability to achieve inner stability. The taxi becomes a confined space that isolates him from meaningful interaction, reinforcing his detachment despite constant exposure to urban life.

Cinematic techniques play a crucial role in constructing alienation. Repetition of routine actions, prolonged silences, and constrained framing create a sense of stagnation. Drawing on Deleuze's concept of the "time-image," the

film resists linear progression, instead presenting suspended and unresolved experience (Deleuze, 1989). Visual elements such as mirrors and reflections fragment Travis's identity, most notably in the "You talkin' to me?" scene, which reveals his psychological disintegration. Travis's desire for purification, expressed through his recurring fantasy of cleansing the city, reflects a distorted form of transcendence. However, in the absence of a stable ethical framework, this impulse devolves into violence. The climactic shootout, though seemingly decisive, lacks moral clarity and resolves into ambiguity. The subsequent framing of Travis as a hero further complicates interpretation, exposing the instability of social judgment.

The film's conclusion reinforces this uncertainty. Travis's final glance in the rearview mirror suggests that his psychological fragmentation persists, undermining any sense of closure. As in modernist literature, resolution is deferred rather than achieved. Ultimately, *Taxi Driver* portrays alienation as both social and spiritual dislocation. The urban environment functions not merely as setting but as an externalization of fragmented consciousness, crowded yet isolating, dynamic yet devoid of coherence. Through subjective narration, repetition, and ambiguous closure, the film constructs emptiness as a structural condition. While Travis attempts to overcome this condition through action, his efforts only intensify it, revealing that modern emptiness persists regardless of response.

## VI. TWO VISIONS OF EMPTINESS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Placing *The Hollow Men* alongside *Taxi Driver* reveals that modern emptiness persists across time, adapting rather than disappearing. Despite differences in medium and historical context, both works depict worlds in which stable systems of meaning have eroded. The spiritual crisis articulated by T. S. Eliot in the aftermath of the First World War reappears, in transformed form, in Martin Scorsese's portrayal of post-Vietnam America. In both cases, emptiness emerges not merely as a mood but as a structural and unresolved condition.

In *The Hollow Men*, emptiness manifests as paralysis. Eliot's figures exist in suspension, "Between the idea / And the reality" (Eliot, 1925/1952) unable to convert intention into action. Their fragmented speech and diminished voices reflect a world where belief persists only as memory. Emptiness thus produces inertia and quiet disintegration. By contrast, *Taxi Driver* presents emptiness through excessive action. Travis Bickle attempts to overcome dislocation through violent intervention, seeking meaning in moral purification (Scorsese, 1976). However, this apparent contrast reveals a deeper similarity: his violence is not a

resolution but a symptom of absence. His actions expose, rather than resolve, the instability he inhabits.

This tension is most evident in the film's climax. While the violent outburst appears to contradict Eliot's "whimper," it ultimately dissolves into ambiguity. The aftermath lacks moral clarity, and Travis's subsequent recognition as a hero feels hollow. His final glance in the mirror reintroduces instability, suggesting that no fundamental transformation has occurred. In this sense, the apparent "bang" recedes into a quieter, unresolved continuation (Eliot, 1925/1952; Scorsese, 1976).

The environments of both works reinforce this parallel. Eliot's barren landscape reflects absence and spiritual depletion, while Scorsese's urban setting, though visually saturated, similarly withholds meaning. In both cases, external space mirrors internal fragmentation. Form further unites these texts. Eliot's fragmented syntax, repetition, and disrupted prayer enact emptiness at the level of language. Similarly, *Taxi Driver* employs voice-over narration, visual confinement, and repetition to construct subjective disorientation. Across different artistic forms, emptiness becomes structural rather than merely thematic.

Both works also engage with distorted forms of transcendence. In Eliot's poem, prayer remains incomplete, signalling a desire for belief that cannot be fulfilled (Eliot, 1925/1952). In Scorsese's film, transcendence appears as moral absolutism, yet collapses into violence due to its lack of grounding (Scorsese, 1976). In each case, the longing for meaning persists but fails to stabilize experience.

Ultimately, the comparison demonstrates that modern emptiness is not singular in expression. It may appear as paralysis or aggression, withdrawal or excess, yet its underlying condition remains consistent. The continuity between these works highlights how modernist fragmentation evolves into cinematic subjectivity while retaining its core instability. Both texts resist resolution. Eliot's poem concludes in quiet diminishment, while Scorsese's film ends in unease. Neither restores coherence; instead, both sustain ambiguity. Through this shared refusal of closure, *The Hollow Men* and *Taxi Driver* reveal emptiness as a persistent and defining condition of modern consciousness.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This study has examined representations of spiritual emptiness, alienation, and existential instability in *The Hollow Men* and *Taxi Driver*. Despite differences in medium and historical context, both works articulate a shared modern condition: the erosion of stable meaning in twentieth-century life. T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* reflects the disillusionment of post-World War I Europe, portraying

figures suspended "between the idea / And the reality" (Eliot, 1925/1952). Their condition is defined by paralysis, where belief persists as memory but cannot be realized in action. Emptiness appears as quiet, unresolved stagnation.

In contrast, Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* presents a more active yet equally unstable response. Travis Bickle attempts to impose meaning through violent action, but his efforts expose rather than resolve his alienation (Scorsese, 1976). The apparent intensity of his actions ultimately dissolves into ambiguity, echoing Eliot's notion of a "whimper" rather than a definitive resolution. The comparison demonstrates that emptiness is not confined to a particular form or period. Instead, it emerges as a structural condition shaped by modern processes such as secularization, urbanization, and historical trauma. In both works, fragmentation operates not only as a theme but as a formal principle, manifested through disrupted language in poetry and subjective narration and visual disorientation in cinema.

At the same time, the differences between the texts remain significant. Eliot's vision is marked by restraint and quiet dissolution, while Scorsese's is characterized by intensity and eruption. Yet both responses ultimately return to the same condition of instability, where attempts at meaning fail to achieve coherence. Neither work offers resolution or moral certainty. Instead, both sustain ambiguity, emphasizing the persistence of uncertainty in modern experience. By placing these texts in dialogue, this study demonstrates that modern emptiness endures across artistic forms, evolving while retaining its core features of fragmentation, suspension, and unresolved longing.

Ultimately, *The Hollow Men* and *Taxi Driver* suggest that the modern subject remains caught between desire and doubt. The search for meaning continues, but without guarantees of fulfilment. In this ongoing tension lies the enduring relevance of both works, as they reveal emptiness not as absence alone, but as a defining condition of contemporary consciousness.

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