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## Poetics of Revelation: The Unmasked Beast in Eliot and Yeats

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*The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. **Revelation 17:8-10***

Yeats and Eliot were contemporaries, represented the voice of modern disillusionment, were the products of an interesting period that was interesting in terms of its socio-economic setup and because of a period in human history that witnessed whole scale dramatic transformation in and outside the human consciousness. Their poetry typically reflects a bizarre and agnostic trauma as a rebellion and unforeseen dichotomy triggered between the spirit and the matter. Works like *A Vision* (1925) and *Four Quartets* (1943) by these two literary figures reflect societies caught in a whirlpool of antagonistic interests. These particular works of Yeats and Eliot are appropriate because they represent two widely varying view points on the causes, nature and desirability of what each author felt and dressed it in the form of impending apocalypse. Each poem is like a mini revelation and all the poems read together complete the code of impending catastrophe. Therefore, more can be learned by comparing the very different outlooks of the poems than by considering each poem separately.

Histroy as envisioned by Yeats is cyclical in nature. He sees humanity as both the victim and the beneficiary of a series of inescapable historical cycles. He views the destructive pressures on civilization as Cornelia Cook, in her article "Fire and Spirit: Scripture's Shaping Presence in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*," makes mention of "The Hollow Men" in her general treatment of Eliot and spirituality (85-86). However, the closest that modern literary critics come to a direct comparison of the two authors is James Longenbach's. For Longenbach both the poets adhere to a common belief of unfolding of the immanent will where in a new world can be created only when the previous is dismantled.

While critics such as Frank Kermode and Donald Childs have examined and explicated the more prominent works of both poets separately, books and articles that compare Yeats and Eliot as apocalyptic poets are nearly non-existent. Critics seem to agree that Yeats and Eliot wrote apocalyptic poetry, but often differ in their views of the exact nature of apocalypse. It is important to mention here that both the poets had a common theme but the way they experimented it in their respective poems is different. Brown calls Yeats' poem, "a poem of Victorian crisis, a revolt couched as apocalypse against the dominant myth of social progress" (44), referring to the physical, secular world. However, Cook, in discussing Eliot theorizes: "Apocalyptic is not primarily about the end of the world, but about received vision. The most significant characteristic of apocalyptic, then, is the divine revelation" (74), a definition that

echoes Eliot's efforts. Some critics and historicists believe that the word "apocalypse" derives from the Greek and means literally, the lifting of the veil. The Oxford English Dictionary favours the Greek derivation, tracing usage of the term back to the Wyclif Bible in 1382 (O.E.D.). The linguists and scholars of that comprehensive dictionary claim that apocalypse also means, "The 'revelation' of the future granted to St. John in the isle of Patmos" (O.E.D.). The term may also be defined as "The book of the New Testament in which this is recorded" (O.E.D.). It is further noted that in modern usage the word apocalypse means, "By extension: Any revelation or disclosure" (O.E.D.). Thus, it is not surprising that literary critics often differ on the specifics that define apocalyptic literature. Now before going further let us see what Bible says about apocalypse in the book of Revelations,

The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is. (*Revelation 17:8-10*). This same verse finds echo in Yeats poem that is The Second Coming exactly the same way as Bible points out. Before explicating further the above mentioned poem let us first see and check the dimensions of the term Apocalypse, so that we can then analyse Yeats and Eliot in that broad light.

Many critics insist that apocalyptic literature, perhaps attempts to borrow authority from the distant and unreachable past, purports to incorporate secret knowledge that has been re-discovered. Scholar Bruce Jones, writing for the Journal of Biblical Literature favours this interpretation, "The term "apocalyptic" implies an uncovering of something which has been hidden until now. Thus, we rightly apply the term to books of secret teaching which are presented as predictions from the past, culminating in the present . . . . Appeal to the past heightens the significance of the present" (Jones 326). According to Jones, apocalyptic material assumes the knowledgeable patina of "secrets of the ages--lost for centuries" often favoured in modern books and movies (326). Jones' definition can certainly be associated with a Yeatsian version of apocalypse as demonstrated in "The Second Coming.". Yeats' theory that the history of civilization is one of cycles of progress and decline is not original or unique to his writing. As historical records document, many civilizations have risen to greatness precipitously, only to fall into decline seemingly at the height of their glory. Distinguished scholar Frank Kermode, in his article "Sensing Endings," investigates Yeats' eschatology more directly as he explores "Catastrophism, which hypothesized many total cataclysms and many new creations: so that there might exist between the events of a past time and the present a relation of typicality with deviance"(157). This interpretation hints that there might be typical secret knowledge in the past, or at least a typical tendency to assume that such knowledge exists. Kermode's "many total cataclysms and many new creations" (157) agree with Yeats' mythology, expressed in Visions and "The Second Coming," of a cyclical view of history, Critic Jonathon Roberts argues that Wordsworth experienced "a different model of apocalypse in which text and history meet and are fused in personal situation, a moment of revelation: in Wordsworth's writing, apocalypse is particular, not general, and is understood in retrospect, not through prophetic foresight" (361). Roberts further categorizes Wordsworth's approach to apocalypse as "non-violent" and "no eschatological" (361). Therefore, for at least some authors, apocalypse has little to do with violence and is experienced as a personal epiphany. This particular definition of apocalyptic literature shares some characteristics with Eliot's "Hollow Men." Critic Graham Hough, in his book The Mystery Religion of W.B. Yeats, attempts to define the apocalyptic genre. He claims that apocalyptic literature has reached the status of an accepted literary mode and points out

strikingly salient characteristics existent in "The Second Coming": "Most of the characteristics that belong to such literature--riddling or fictional or visionary introductions; claims to universality which go uneasily with fragmentariness and incompleteness; a gnomic and authoritative manner; strange or baffling assertions put down without argument or support; symbolism that partly belongs to the common cultural stock, but suddenly becomes enigmatic or incomprehensible" (64). However, as in other definitions of apocalyptic literature, the terms used by Hough are somewhat vague and defy clear definition. For instance, whether an author's manner is "gnomic and authoritative" is a highly subjective judgment. Other important authors, writing in the same era, deny the very concept of apocalypse. Poet and philosopher Robert Frost, perhaps injecting a note of reason, found all the talk of apocalypse a bit elitist, theorizing "We have no way of knowing that this age is one of the worst in the world's history . . . . It is immodest of a man to think of himself as going down before the worst forces ever mobilized by God" (Frost 105). Yeats and Eliot recorded a pivotal point in western civilization, but each had a different vision. The poets were part of the same literary community. They believed that their societies and civilization in general were on the verge of total and complete collapse and expressed themselves, as was their want, by writing poetry. Now let us see what Yeats is trying to tell us in this poem. "The Second Coming," written in 1919 and published in 1921 in his collection of poems *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, taps into the concept of the gyre and depicts the approach of a new world order. The gyre is one of Yeats' favourite motifs as mentioned earlier, the idea that history occurs in cycles, specifically cycles "twenty centuries" in length (Yeats, "The Second Coming" ln. 19). In this poem, Yeats predicts that the Christian era will soon give way apocalyptically to an era ruled by a godlike desert beast with the body of a lion and the head of a man (ln. 14). Critics have argued about the exact meaning of this image, but a close reading of the poem, combined with some simple genetic work, shows that Yeats saw the new order as a reign of terror haunted by war. "The Second Coming," in its entirety, is an astounding encapsulation of Yeats' idea of the gyre and his fears about the future of mankind; it is expertly woven with threads of prophetic literary reference and impressive poetic techniques.

To begin, the gyre, a spiral or repeated circling motion, is a symbol and a concept that Yeats used repeatedly in his poetry and prose, and the poetics of "The Second Coming" illustrate the idea of the gyre. The repeated words in the poem enforce the idea of "spiral images" (Drake 131); words and phrases, such as "surely" and "is at hand" in lines 9 and 10, "turning" in line 1, "is loosed" in lines 4 and 5, and the very title, "Second Coming" in lines 10 and 11, are repeated, creating an onomatopoeic effect suggesting the repetitive movement of the gyre (Bornstein 203). Similarly, repetitious or paired images give the same effect, as Yeats seems to cycle through his "falcon" ("The Second Coming" ln. 2) to the "desert birds" (ln. 17), "the best lack[ing] all conviction" (ln. 7) to "the worst/...full of passionate intensity" (ln. 7-8), and his central images, the "rocking cradle" of Christ (ln. 20) to the "rough beast" (ln. 21). Other kinds of echoes, literary rather than poetic, emerge as well; Yeats connects "The Second Coming" with Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in lines 7 and 8, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity" (Drake 53), and even, there is an echo of *Divine Comedy*, by altering the "hawk" of an earlier draft to more closely resemble the "ample circuit" of a "falcon" described in Dante's masterpiece. Yeats surely made these allusions to borrow the literary scale of these prophetic masterpieces. But far more important in this respect is his borrowings from the Bible. Most central and obvious are the Second Coming of Christ described in Matthew 24 and the beast of the apocalypse from Revelations, but Purdy also notes "the vision chapters of Daniel (7-12)," "Isaiah's prophecy of the Day of the Lord (14.6-11, 19-22), 'old Ezekiel's cherubim'



(10.1ff), and Jeremiah's denunciation of Isreal (2)" (75), not to mention Yeats' location of the beast's birth at Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ two thousand years ago (Jeffares, W. B. Yeats 38). The Bible is, of course, the western world's primary work of prophecy, and Yeats' use of its language gives his own work a tone of prophecy.

The tool of Yeats' prophecy, crystallized in the "widening gyre" traced by the falcon, is a concept Yeats detailed at some length in a note to the poem in the first printing ("The Second Coming" ln. 1). To summarize, Yeats described an idea he claimed came from Michael Robartes that described the mind's evolution as a process of circling toward the wide end of an idealistic cone until, as he put it in the third line of "The Second Coming," "the center cannot hold" (Ellmann, A Commentary 239-40). At that point a revelation occurs, and the mind shifts to a new center, the narrow end of a cone of opposing idealism, inverted and superimposed on the first, with its narrow end at the center of the wide end of the first (240). This model, explained Yeats in his note, could also be used to describe human history; the world's gyre is shifted by a revelation every two thousand years (241). The results are evident in the upheaval caused by Christ's teaching, an upheaval two thousand years before that, and the frightening wars of Yeats' time (241). Based on these notes, it seems that Yeats' opposed gyres are in conflict, but neither is especially bad; each merely marks the coronation of "a new kind of god," as Jeffares puts it (W. B. Yeats 36).

Some critics propagate this point of view. According to Donald Davie, "the poem says...that when the superhuman invades the human realm all that the human can say of it is that it is non-human: there can be no discriminating at such a time between subhuman and superhuman, between bestial and divine" (79). Under this point of view, the new world order that Yeats predicts in this poem is not by definition better or worse than the old Christian order; it is simply unfamiliar. As Stock describes it, "the only thing we [or the speaker] know of it for certain is that it will appear monstrous and terrifying to those whose traditions it supersedes" (187). So the monstrosity of the new order is merely a result of the viewer's being accustomed to the old order, having a similar effect as that of the Christian era's order on Tacitus, who, "more puzzled than hostile," ruled "that Christians were enemies of the human race" (186). The beast's order is monstrous for the same reasons that the Christ child's rocking cradle is a "nightmare" from the beast's own perspective (Yeats, "The Second Coming" ln. 20).

Under this point of view, the "rough beast" of the poem takes on an identity very consistent with its physical description; it is "sphinx-like" (Ellman, Identity of Yeats 50). If it physically resembles a sphinx, "with lion body and the head of a man," it ought also to be like a sphinx in other ways (Yeats, "The Second Coming" 14). And if it is not a thing of evil, but a monster because it is foreign, then its foreignness is well expressed by its resemblance to a sphinx, since the sphinx, from Oedipus, is a riddler (Adams 143). So the monster, it would seem, is nothing more than an enigma, monstrous because it is unfamiliar. But the creature described is not quite so tame. The beast's eyes are "pitiless as the sun" (Yeats, "The Second Coming" ln. 15), and it is followed not by the (literally) noble falcon, but by "shadows" (already a dark and suggestive word choice) of "desert birds," certainly vultures, for no other bird makes such a prominent habit of reeling, as these birds are doing (17). And no self-respecting vulture would soar around a titanic beast simply because of its symbolic significance; vultures go where there is carrion. This beast is not only pitiless, but it leaves a wake of carnage. It is no passive but alien riddler; Yeats made it monstrous because it is a monster.

If the poem itself is not enough to show Yeats' attitude toward the beast, some genetic background is enlightening. Yeats wrote in the introduction to *The Resurrection* that he "'began

to imagine, as always at [his] left side just out of range of the sight, a brazen winged beast that [he] associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction" (Jeffares, A Commentary 243). In a footnote, Yeats explained that this same "'brazen winged beast'...was 'afterwards described in [his] poem 'The Second Coming'" (243). The only reference to any sort of riddler here is in the fact that the monster laughs in the midst of its "'ecstatic destruction'" (243). Many critics remark that this poem is deeply concerned with the grim drama of modern war, including World War I as well as the Russian Revolution and the Black-and-Tan War in Ireland, and Yeats himself described his poem as a reaction to "'the growing murderousness of the world'" to which these wars were alerting him (Jeffares, A Commentary 242); this concern with war marks "The Second Coming" as a modernist work (Abrams 119). One of Yeats' early manuscripts of "The Second Coming" actually makes direct reference to the Germans in Russia (Yeats, Michael Robartes 151). And, years after the poem was written and published, Yeats said in a letter that "The Second Coming" predicted "what is happening in Europe," World War II (Ellman, Yeats: the Man 278). Yeats' attitude toward this monster is clearly not ambivalence. Finally, it could be argued that the beast, the very "embodiment of the irrational destructiveness of all wars," is not an aspect of the new order, but merely a feature of the tumultuous transition, part of the revelation. But this argument is completely nullified by the final line, which makes clear that this terrible, bestial god of war does not merely usher in the new age, but "slouches toward Bethlehem to be born" into Christ's place; this beast is nothing less than the new world order Yeats prophesies in "The Second Coming" (Yeats, "The Second Coming" ln. 22).

"The Second Coming" is not about ambivalence. It is not about looking forward to a new age, with new philosophies and new wonders. Purdy says that "Yeats resists coming to conclusions even when, given alternatives, choosing seems inevitable, and even when seeming to choose" (74). It seems he has left a riddle with "The Second Coming," and a conclusion that critics do not agree on, but the eventual answer seems clear. Yeats saw Europe, his world, wracked by inhumane warfare. And he feared that the beast was coming to claim its kingdom, right on time.

### **Eliot's Take**

As it has been mentioned earlier that both the poets deal with the same theme of apocalypse but with different mode of experimentation. Eliot begins his poem with an epigraph from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "Mistah Kurtz – he dead" (88), beginning his poems with an epigraph was not an unusual practice for the poet. As Jane Worthington reports, Eliot used some form of epigraph to frame many of his poems including, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "The Portrait of a Lady," and of course "The Waste Land" (1-17). Diverse reasons for the epigraph have been suggested; Eliot rarely has only a single reason for including material; his poems exhibit layers upon layers of meaning. I believe that the epigraph indicates that Mr. Kurtz, with his focus on materialism, is spiritually dead, hollow man. The poem is narrated by one of the 'Hollow Men'. In the first section of the poem, the Hollow Men are leaning together almost like lifeless beings. The description of them 'leaning together' with their heads 'filled with straw' makes them appear as feeble and lifeless as scarecrows. They cannot even stand or think or function on their own. The place they inhabit, as well as themselves, is described as 'dry' ('our dried voices'; 'in our dry cellar'). The meaningless lives they lead are evident here, with reference to their 'dried voices' that are 'quiet and meaningless' when they 'whisper together'. They exist in a place between Heaven and Hell, not yet having crossed over the River Styx to make it into either place. The people who have crossed over remember them only as 'the Hollow Men; the stuffed men'. There is some suggestion here that it is preferable to be a 'lost violent soul' than a 'hollow' and 'stuffed' man. The Hollow Men were too timid and cowardly to

commit the violent acts ('not as lost violent souls') that would have brought them to Hell ('death's other Kingdom'). Most critics agree that the opening lines of the poem refer to an emotional and spiritual "hollowness." Since the hollow men are also referred to as the "stuffed men" and have a "headpiece filled with straw" (I, l.4), I believe that they are associated with the legend of Guy Fawkes. Fawkes was a Catholic Englishman who was captured while attempting to carry out a plot to blow up the houses of parliament. Every year the children of England explode firecrackers in memory of that event. They commonly ask for coins to buy the fireworks in much the same way that American children ask for Halloween candy. The opening stanza is therefore connected to the little-used second half of the poem's title, "A penny for the Old Guy," the cry of the children asking for coins for fireworks. This equates the search for meaning by the hollow men with a children's game, an association repeated later in the poem with the circle dance. The fifth and last section begins with the nursery rhyme Here we go round the mulberry bush, except that instead of a mulberry bush, the children are circling a prickly-pear cactus plant. These lines suggest the Hollow Men's frustration. In the final lines, the Mulberry Bush rhyme turns into a musical rhyme about the end of the world. Here too we expect the world to end with a noisy explosion, but for the Hollow Men it ends with a mere 'whimper', quiet and meaningless. The narrator believes that the end for the Hollow Men will come not with an apocalyptic catastrophe but as a result of men who allow themselves to decay and become 'hollow.'

As a result of the Great War (i.e. World War I), Eliot perceived his society and culture as being in a state of shock; wounded and crumbling. There was a breakdown in communication. World War I had ruined or eradicated an entire generation of young men in Europe, as well as the land. Trench warfare and chemical weapons had destroyed plant life. In the poem there is reference to this dead land, now filled with stones and cacti. These corpse-like Hollow Men salute the stars with their hands raised, as they attempt to come to terms with the destruction that has caused their minds to become 'hollow' and 'dry'. Eliot was concerned about the freedoms inherent in the modern age. He explores these concerns in his poetry:

The Hollow Men portrays Eliot's concerns for a society and culture lacking in faith, humanity and morality. He believed that a society without a religion, morals and values could not thrive. He did not believe that any religion could survive that was not a religion of life after death, or the supernatural in some form. All these concerns form central themes in this poem. There is a sense of alienation in the poem; a breakdown in communication between the Hollow Men, both with each other and within their own internal selves. This results in a loss of purpose and identity on their part. The poem is written in fragments, as well as highlighting only fragments of the Hollow Men, so that they seem almost disembodied and not alive. It all adds to the general sense of futility, despair and an existence that is meaningless — all of which characterise the lives of the 'hollow' men. Eliot questioned the materialism and lack of faith evident in his world. He felt that the people had lost their sense of purpose, truth and ethics. In such a world we become devoid of morals and values, and there is a lack of responsibility. This is the 'dead land'; the spiritual desert where 'we grope to avoid speech' because we cannot communicate meaningfully.

The Hollow Men was originally composed as several different poems which the poet gradually came to think of as sequenced. Eliot uses fragmentation in his poetry to highlight the chaos of modern existence. The poem is written in free verse, because it does not have a regular metre or rhyme scheme. It is almost like a dramatic monologue, or speech. But the lines do not always flow, and are jarring and fragmented. This is most apparent in the last section of the poem, where the line about 'the Shadow' in line 76 and thereafter keeps interrupting the flow of

the poem. The poem consists of five sections of various lengths, with lines that are generally short. The fragmented structure of the poem adds to the themes of fragmentation and alienation evident in the poem. There are also fragmented and disembodied images and concepts presented in the poem that add to this sense and theme of fragmentation.

The poem also circles back on itself in a sinister manner, just like the nursery rhyme around the 'prickly-pear' in the final section. Certain concepts are constantly repeated in the poem, these being 'hollow', 'kingdom', 'eye', 'dry', 'death', 'dream' and 'shadow'. In lines 11 and 12 ('Shape without form, shade without colour, paralysed force, gesture without motion,') the general structure of A without B seems to highlight the main themes in the poem, those of meaninglessness, shallow nothingness and paralysis. All these themes and concepts cancel each other by means of binary opposition (where two opposing ideas are put together, cancelling both and making the whole meaningless). This is also evident in part V: ('Between the idea and the reality; between the motion and the act'). In part V the structural pattern of A without B is interrupted with the line 'Falls the Shadow' (line 76 and thereafter). The Shadow represents the force of darkness and fear, making the Hollow Men incapable of anything meaningful. It interferes with their willpower and they have no courage or strength to follow through with their actions and intentions, and instead must live lives of quiet and meaningless desperation. The Shadow becomes the God of anti-creation. It stops time, and leads to an existence of hollow nothingness. Directly after this line concerning 'the Shadow' is a line fragment from the Lord's prayer; and a complaint about life being too long. It all forms a kind of 'anti-prayer'; fragmented and highlighting the meaningless nature of the Hollow Men's lives. 'The Shadow' could also represent the fear of death that is ever-present. A further interpretation is that the 'Negative Way' of 'the Shadow' eventually leads to an encounter with the meaningless and nothingness which, paradoxically, can inspire the individual with faith in God. The references to the settings described as 'kingdoms' in The Hollow Men is symbolic. There is a description of 'death's other kingdom', 'the twilight kingdom', 'valley of dying stars' and 'hollow valley', meaning that there is 'another' world of death, very like this one but worse, it would seem. It is a place between Heaven and Hell, and separate from life after death itself. It is a kind of living death; a place that is 'hollow' like the people who inhabit it. It is a place of endless sadness and despair ('dead land, cactus land; the broken jaw of our lost kingdoms'), proving that there is another kind of death that is not caused by the death of the physical body; a death of the spirit. In Part V, 'Kingdom' is written with a capital K and refers to the Lord ('For Thine is the Kingdom'); while in previous sections there is reference to 'death's dream kingdom'. Here it refers to Heaven. 'This beach of the tumid river' (line 60) may symbolise, according to Greek mythology, the River Styx which souls must cross in order to reach either Heaven or Hell.

In death's dream kingdom, 'There is a tree swinging'. The wind's singing ('And voices are in the wind's singing more distant and more solemn than a fading star'), and its movements can be compared to the swinging of the tree, in that they do not have a particular direction; they are meaningless. The verb 'swing' means to 'move back and forth or from side to side as if suspended or hanging from a support'. The voices are described as 'distant' within the wind's singing, and thus cannot be heard. In 'death's dream kingdom' the voices — like the tree — are even more 'quiet and meaningless' than they were before, and they are not heard, meaning that the Hollow Men's prayers are not useful in this place.

In line 29 ('Let me be no nearer') the desire of the narrator expresses the deepest will of his soul — he knows that 'death's dream kingdom' is approaching, and does not want it to come



any closer ('no nearer'), because he is afraid of meeting the eyes ('not that final meeting in the twilight kingdom'). Both 'twilight' and 'fading star' represent a gradual reduction in light.' Let me also wear such deliberate disguises' suggests that the narrator wants to go unnoticed, so that the eyes do not recognize him. He wants to wear 'Rat's coat, crow skin, crossed staves', and the images presented are those of a 'scarecrow' dressed in animal covering, with the rat symbolizing the plague and the crow death. The Hollow Men are presented as inhuman in every way, except appearance. The speaker wants to be like the wind ('behaving as the wind behaves, no nearer'), so that he cannot get any closer to 'death's dream kingdom'. In the third and fourth section, the 'dead man's hand' is disembodied and fragmented just like the 'eyes' and the 'voices' that seem to act on their own. 'The 'fading star' appears again, but now as a visible element in the landscape. 'Thrinkle' means a flickering light, and is related to 'twilight', but it can also be applied to a person's eyes. 'Under the twinkle' suggests that they are being 'watched' by some supernatural force. 'It is like this in death's other kingdom' suggests that the narrator was contemplating the landscape and could not assimilate so much desolation. The Hollow Men are portrayed as being 'alone' or 'alienated', even though they are 'together'. The Hollow Men are frightened and feel cold ('trembling'), and this action is performed with "tenderness". This is the ultimate portrayal of the Hollow Men's emotions.

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