



Between Life and Death: The Meaning of Human Life in T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" and Jibanananda Das's "At Bochor Ager Ekdin"

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Abstract

Being alive is not always the same as feeling fully alive. T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (1925) and Jibanananda Das's "At Bochor Ager Ekdin" ("At Bochor Ager Ekdin," or "A Day Eight Years Ago") (1944) explore this painful difference through two distinct poetic worlds. Eliot imagines a group of living people who have lost spiritual substance, moral courage, meaningful speech, and the power to act. Jibanananda begins with a physically dead man whose wife, child, love, and material security could not protect him from an unexplained weariness with existence. This article argues that the two poems separate biological survival from meaningful life, but they explain the separation differently. Eliot's hollow men suffer from spiritual paralysis: they cannot bring thought, desire, prayer, and action together. Jibanananda's dead man suffers from existential exhaustion: he becomes painfully conscious that ordinary happiness is not "all" of life. The contrast is sharpened by setting, voice, and time. Eliot's speakers inhabit a dry land of broken stone and dying stars, while Jibanananda surrounds human death with owls, frogs, mosquitoes, insects, sunlight, and trees that continue to desire life. Eliot places death inside life; Jibanananda places the question of life inside death. Through close comparative reading informed by modernism and existential thought, the article argues that neither poem simply celebrates despair. It reads both as leaving faint but important forms of possibility: Eliot through incomplete signs of vision and prayer, and Jibanananda through the abundant, continuing life of nature.

1. Introduction

Human beings do more than breathe, eat, work, and sleep. They also ask why they are alive. This simple difference between living and questioning life creates one of the deepest problems in modern literature. A person may have a home, a family, social respect, and enough money, but still feel that something essential is missing. Another person may continue the routines of daily life while feeling empty inside. Such people are biologically alive, yet their experience of life has become weak, broken, or unbearable.

T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" and Jibanananda Das's "আট বছর আগের একদিন" examine this condition in memorable but very different ways. Eliot opens with a collective confession: "We are the hollow men" (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). The speaker does not say "I." The word "we" makes hollowness larger than one private sadness. It becomes the condition of a group, a generation, or even a civilization. These people have bodies and voices, but their inner centre has disappeared. They can whisper, desire, remember, and make gestures, yet they cannot turn these things into meaningful action.

Jibanananda's poem opens not with a living crowd but with news of one corpse taken to a morgue. The dead man had not clearly failed in the ordinary sense. The poem states:

“বধু শুয়েছিলো পাশে— শিশুটিও ছিলো; / প্রেম ছিলো, আশা ছিলো”[“His wife lay beside him—the child was there too; / there was love, there was hope”] (Das, 1944, pp. 25–27).

The calm list is disturbing because it removes easy explanations. The man was not simply unloved, homeless, or defeated by poverty. His family life contained affection and hope. Nevertheless, the poem presents him as having desired death. The poem can therefore be read as asking a hard question: if love, family, comfort, and hope are present, why can life still become unbearable?

The two poems meet at this question, but they do not give the same answer. Eliot presents living people who have become spiritually dead. Jibanananda presents a physically dead person whose death forces the living to ask what life means. Put in one sentence, Eliot places death inside life, while Jibanananda places the question of life inside death. This difference creates the central argument of this article: both poems show that biological existence does not automatically produce meaningful existence, but Eliot represents the failure as spiritual paralysis whereas Jibanananda represents it as existential exhaustion.

Here, “spiritual” does not refer only to formal religion. It also means an inner connection among value, truth, responsibility, and action. “Existential” refers to questions created by being human: Why am I here? What gives my life purpose? How should I live when death is certain? These terms help describe the poems, but they should not control them. The aim is not to force two culturally different poets into one Western theory. The aim is to let close reading reveal both their shared concern and their different poetic answers.

The study addresses two research questions: (1) How do “The Hollow Men” and “আট বছর আগের একদিন” distinguish biological existence from meaningful life? (2) How do their uses of voice, action, death, nature, and time shape the different forms of spiritual paralysis and existential exhaustion represented in each poem?

The article first reviews key scholarship on both poems. It then explains its method and theoretical frame before comparing voice, identity, consciousness, action, death, nature, time, faith, and the poems' endings. The analysis uses short Bengali quotations followed by simple English translations in square brackets. Unless another translator is named, these translations are made for this article and aim for clarity rather than exact reproduction of rhythm.

2. Literary and Historical Context

2.1 Eliot and the Late Mood of Early Modernism

“The Hollow Men” was published as a sequence in 1925. Faber's publishing history records that Poems 1909–1925 included the new sequence and gathered the verse Eliot wished to preserve (Faber and Faber, n.d.). The poem belongs to the difficult years between *The Waste Land* and Eliot's later religious poetry. Martin Scofield (1988, pp. 137–166) describes it as both a continuation of the creative mood of *The Waste Land* and an attempt at a new beginning. This double movement is important. “The Hollow Men” is filled with failure, dryness, and broken speech, but it also contains images of eyes, a star, a many-petalled rose, prayer, and a kingdom. These signs do not complete a path to salvation, yet they prevent the poem from becoming a simple statement that nothing matters.

Eliot's modernism works through fragments, echoes, broken prayers, repeated phrases, and unexpected combinations of high and popular culture. The children's-song rhythm of the “prickly pear” sits beside the language of the Lord's Prayer. A scarecrow-like body stands near Dantean images of the afterlife. Such mixtures do not merely make the poem difficult. They show a consciousness that cannot assemble its cultural materials into a complete belief. The form itself becomes hollow: many pieces remain, but their common centre is uncertain.

2.2 Jibanananda and Bengali Modernity

Jibanananda Das's "আট বছর আগের একদিন" appeared in মহাপৃথিবী (Mahaprithibi) in 1944, amid colonial rule, war, famine, and social change. Clinton B. Seely's biography situates the poet's literary development within experiences of solitude, insecurity, urban life, and an intense attachment to Bengal's landscapes (Seely, 1990). These biographical contexts are used here only as background to Jibanananda's historical and literary milieu, not as direct causes of the poem's imagery, speakers, or treatment of death; the interpretation that follows is grounded primarily in the poem's language and form.

Jibanananda's modernism differs from Eliot's. His lines often move through familiar rural objects—moon, owl, frog, mosquito, fly, dragonfly, tree, grain, sunlight—but place them in strange relationships. The ordinary natural world becomes mysterious without becoming unreal. In "আট বছর আগের একদিন," a silence arrives like "the neck of a camel," an image that joins a Bengali room to the emptiness of a distant desert. An old blind owl responds to the disappearance of the moon with practical joy because darkness makes hunting easier. A decaying frog still asks for two more moments. These images are not a peaceful nature postcard; they can be read as presenting life as hungry, persistent, and sometimes cruel.

The poem is also built around memory. As Faizul Latif Chowdhury (2009) observes, the "eight years" appear in the title rather than the narrative, placing the death in a remembered past while the speaker stands in a later present. Time is therefore not only chronology. It is the pressure of remembering an event that still has not been explained. The dead man's story returns because the question behind it remains alive.

2.3 Earlier Readings and the Comparative Gap

Criticism of "The Hollow Men" commonly emphasizes spiritual sterility, fear of judgment, broken communication, and the gap between intention and action. Scofield (1988, pp. 137–166) calls its mood one of tense weakness while also noticing new spiritual imagery. Scholarship on Jibanananda's poem has focused on suicide, self-consciousness, language, nature, and the social history inside individual despair. Manas Ray (2015, pp. 151–170) warns against reducing its many voices to one private decision: nature's cruelty and continuation complicate a simple movement from consciousness to suicide. This article accepts that caution. "বিপন্ন বিস্ময়" ("perilous wonder") names an inward force, not a complete cause or medical diagnosis.

Few readings place these two poems in sustained dialogue. A quick comparison might say that both are pessimistic poems about death. That statement is too general to be useful. Their speakers, landscapes, religious signs, and endings are sharply different. A stronger comparison asks how each poem separates existence from meaning and what kind of remainder survives that separation. In this reading, Eliot leaves broken signs of transcendence, while Jibanananda foregrounds an overflowing biological world. The comparison thus moves beyond "similar themes" toward different structures of modern consciousness.

3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study uses qualitative comparative close reading of repeated words, images, pronouns, settings, and symbolic movements. Each poem is first read in its own historical and cultural setting; the comparison then follows shared questions about meaning, action, death, and nature. Difference is treated as a source of insight, not a problem to remove.

Modernism provides the literary frame. In both poems, traditional sources of order no longer work smoothly. Speech breaks down, familiar symbols become strange, and the self cannot feel at home in ordinary life. Yet "modernism" does not mean one identical world style. Eliot's modernism carries European Christian, literary, and urban fragments. Jibanananda's modernism grows through Bengali history, rural and urban memory, colonial modernity, and a sensuous but unsettling natural world.

Existential thought provides a second, limited frame. Albert Camus begins *The Myth of Sisyphus* by treating the question of whether life is worth living as philosophically fundamental

(Camus, 1991, p. 3). Jean-Paul Sartre argues that human beings must create themselves through choice rather than receive a ready-made essence (Sartre, 2007, p. 22). These ideas help name the poems' concern with meaning, choice, and death. Still, neither poem is an illustration of Camus or Sartre. Eliot's Christian symbolism does not fit a purely secular existential model, and Jibanananda's nature is more than the background of an isolated individual. Theory is used as a lamp, not as a cage.

Literary representation must also be separated from real-life judgment. A poem can explore suicide or weariness without recommending self-destruction. Neither Jibanananda's dead man nor Eliot's hollow men should be treated as clinical cases.

The central analytical proposition can now be stated clearly: Both poems distinguish mere existence from meaningful existence. Eliot portrays a collective humanity whose spiritual centre has emptied, so desire cannot become action. Jibanananda portrays an individual for whom the usual structures of happiness remain present but cannot quiet a perilous awareness within. Eliot's dominant condition is paralysis; Jibanananda's is exhaustion.

4. Mere Existence and the Crisis of Meaning

The opening words of "The Hollow Men" create an identity through absence. "Hollow" means that an outer shape remains while the inside is empty. A hollow tree, vessel, or statue has a surface but lacks substance at its centre. Eliot then adds a second image: "We are the stuffed men" (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). At first "hollow" and "stuffed" may appear opposite. One is empty; the other is full. Yet the stuffing is straw. These figures are filled with material that cannot think, love, choose, or believe. They resemble the effigies associated with the poem's opening reference to Guy Fawkes. The human outline survives, but humanity has become theatrical and second-hand.

This is why "hollow" is more exact than simply "sad." Sadness still contains emotional depth. The hollow men lack a stable depth from which strong feeling or responsible action might grow. Their tragedy is not that they feel one painful emotion. It is that their thoughts, voices, bodies, and values no longer form a whole. "Shape without form" captures this condition (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). Shape is the visible outline; form is the inner principle that gives the outline order and purpose. Modern people may have jobs, titles, routines, and social identities—many shapes—without knowing what these things are for.

Jibanananda begins at the opposite end. His dead man is not shown as empty. He has relationships, memory, desire, and a mind capable of suffering. The poem carefully blocks the reader's first explanations. The speaker says the man was not defeated in love; marriage had not left a gap; hunger and cold had not broken him. Then comes the crucial correction:

“নারীর হৃদয়— প্রেম— শিশু— গৃহ— নয় সবখানি; / অর্থ নয়, কীর্তি নয়, সচ্ছলতা নয়—”[“A woman's heart—love—child—home—are not the whole; / not wealth, not fame, not comfort—”] (Das, 1944, pp. 25–27).

The repeated “নয়” (“not”) removes one conventional answer after another. Family is valuable, but not complete. Money can reduce suffering, but not answer every human question. Fame can make a person visible, but not necessarily make life meaningful. The poem does not insult these goods. It suggests their limits. A life can be externally complete and internally unbearable.

This produces a first major similarity. Both poems distrust outward evidence. Eliot's figures look human but are inwardly hollow. Jibanananda's man looks fortunate but is inwardly tired. The poems suggest that appearance may not reveal the whole truth of a person. Social categories such as husband, father, worker, believer, or citizen do not guarantee an experienced sense of purpose.

The difference lies in what fills the inner space. Eliot's men have straw: an image of borrowed, dry, lifeless content. Jibanananda's man has “আরো-এক বিপন্ন বিশ্বয়” (“another perilous wonder”) moving in the blood (Das, 1944, pp. 25–27). One figure lacks inward

substance; the other is troubled by too much inward pressure. Therefore, hollow and tired are not synonyms. The hollow person cannot reach a deep centre. The tired person encounters a depth that will not become peaceful or clear.

5. “Hollow” and “ক্লান্ত”: Two Forms of Modern Suffering

The Bengali word “ক্লান্ত” means tired or exhausted, but its repetition in Jibanananda’s poem gives it unusual force:

“আমাদের ক্লান্ত করে / ক্লান্ত— ক্লান্ত করে”[“It makes us tired— / tired, terribly tired”] (Das, 1944, pp. 25–27).

The broken repetition sounds like a mind trying to explain something that ordinary language cannot hold. It is not the tiredness cured by one night of sleep. Indeed, sleep and death become dangerously close in the poem. The man may have lacked sleep for a long time; now the morgue provides a sleep from which he will never wake. The poem’s language can make death appear as a cessation of exhaustion, but its wider structure leaves that appearance unresolved rather than presenting death as relief, victory, or an answer.

Eliot’s key phrase is not exhaustion but “Paralysed force” (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). Again, two opposites are joined. Force implies energy; paralysis means that energy cannot move. The hollow men are not completely without wishes. They fear the eyes, seek disguises, whisper together, imagine prayer, and stand near a final meeting. Yet no desire becomes a completed act. Their suffering comes from separation: thought from reality, emotion from response, possibility from existence.

Jibanananda’s man does complete an act, but it is an act against his own continuation. This does not make him stronger or more authentic than Eliot’s speakers. It marks a different crisis. The hollow men remain in endless suspension; Jibanananda’s man ends his own continuation, but the poem does not present that act as a solution. The tree, fireflies, owl, and other creatures keep the meaning of the death unsettled.

This distinction matters in the sections that follow because it shapes the poems’ different uses of pronouns, voice, vision, time, and relation to nature.

5.1 The Collective “We” and the Singular “He”

Pronouns deepen this difference. Eliot repeatedly says “we,” “our,” and “us.” The hollow men lean together and whisper together. Their condition is collective, but togetherness does not create community. They are physically close and spiritually isolated. The phrase “Leaning together” suggests that each weak figure depends on another equally weak figure. No one can stand alone, yet no one can truly support anyone else.

This collective voice also spreads responsibility. “We” may sound honest because it admits a shared condition, but it can hide the individual person. If everyone is hollow, who will choose differently? The collective becomes a shelter from decision. Their speech is shared, but their shared language is “quiet and meaningless” (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92).

Jibanananda first speaks of “he,” a particular man. The narrator examines his family and circumstances, then addresses him as “you,” making the remembered death intimate. Later the poem turns toward “আমাদের” (“our”), especially when the perilous wonder is said to play inside “our” blood. This change is essential. The dead man is not dismissed as a strange exception. His crisis exposes something within the living speaker and perhaps within all people. At the end, the narrator imagines growing old beside the owl. The movement is therefore from one death toward shared mortality.

Eliot begins with a crowd and reveals isolation. Jibanananda begins with an isolated corpse and reveals a shared human problem. The directions are opposite, but both poems show that physical nearness does not guarantee existential connection. A wife can sleep beside a husband without knowing the full burden in his mind. Hollow men can lean together without speaking meaningfully.

6. Voice, Vision, and the Failure of Action

6.1 Dried Voices and the Speech of Death

Voice usually proves human presence. Through speech, people share thought, make promises, pray, protest, and ask for help. Eliot removes this confidence. The hollow men's voices are "dried," and their whisper resembles wind in dry grass or rats moving over broken glass (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). Sound remains, but meaning has drained away.

The images matter. Dry grass has lost moisture, softness, and growth. Broken glass suggests a damaged human environment. Rats suggest decay and hidden movement. Together they create a soundscape without open conversation. Even when the hollow men stand together, their words cannot build a common world.

Jibanananda's dead man has no voice at all, yet his silence becomes the centre of a long poem. Others speak around him: the narrator, the imagined silence near the window, the owl, and the signs of animal life. The dead man's action has created a question that words cannot settle. Thus Eliot gives speech without meaning, while Jibanananda gives silence that produces meaning. In Eliot, living speakers fail to communicate. In Jibanananda, a dead man's silence forces communication to begin.

The owl's comic voice is especially important. It notices that the old moon has gone and declares the darkness "চমৎকার!" ("Wonderful!") because mice can now be caught (Das, 1944, pp. 25–27). The word sounds cruel beside the human corpse, but the owl is not morally cruel in a human sense. It speaks from appetite and survival. Its practical joy breaks the solemnity of the morgue and refuses to let human despair become the only truth in the poem.

6.2 Eyes, Avoidance, and Painful Awareness

Eyes dominate Eliot's second and fourth sections. The speaker fears "Eyes I dare not meet in dreams" (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). These eyes may suggest divine judgment, moral truth, self-knowledge, or the direct gaze of those who have crossed into another kingdom. Their exact identity remains open, but their function can be read as exposing what the hollow men wish to avoid.

The speakers prefer disguises—rat's coat, crow skin, crossed sticks—and ask to be no nearer to the final meeting. Avoidance becomes their basic action. They do not simply lack truth; they fear the experience of seeing it. Later, "The eyes are not here," and the hollow valley becomes "sightless" (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). Without vision, the speakers cannot find direction. Their physical eyes may exist, but moral and spiritual perception has failed.

Jibanananda's man suffers from almost the opposite condition. The poem repeatedly asks what he saw: "কোন্ ভূত?" ["What ghost?"] (Das, 1944, pp. 25–27). No literal ghost is identified. The "ghost" may be a sudden awareness of life's insufficiency, a private fear, a social wound, or a shape given to the unknown. The man appears to see too much rather than too little. He sees that human life is not the same as the life of the dragonfly or robin. He recognizes a gap between natural desire and reflective human consciousness.

This contrast produces one of the strongest comparative insights. Eliot's hollow men suffer from spiritual blindness; Jibanananda's man suffers from painful awareness. Eliot's speakers cannot face the truth. Jibanananda's figure may be overwhelmed by a truth he cannot explain. One lacks vision; the other cannot survive what vision has revealed.

Still, the contrast should not be made absolute. Jibanananda's man may misunderstand his situation, and Eliot's speakers possess enough awareness to know that they are hollow. Both poems therefore portray damaged self-knowledge. The difference is one of emphasis: avoidance in Eliot, unbearable recognition in Jibanananda.

6.3 The Shadow Between Thought and Fulfilment

The most famous structural passage in Eliot's poem places "the Shadow" between idea and reality, motion and act, conception and creation, emotion and response, desire and fulfilment,

power and existence (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). The repeated grammar turns the poem into a map of failed transitions. Human life contains beginnings, but something interrupts completion.

The Shadow is powerful because it is not explained as one object. It may include fear, weakness, guilt, lack of faith, historical fragmentation, or the divided self. By leaving it unnamed, Eliot makes it large enough to cover many forms of failure. The hollow men can imagine, feel, and desire, but they cannot cross the middle space.

Jibanananda's poem contains a related gap. The man has love but does not experience life as lovable. He has hope but cannot continue. He has a home but does not feel at home in existence. The gap is not between possession and poverty; it is between possessing the goods of life and receiving meaning from them. His "perilous wonder" plays in the blood like an inward Shadow that ordinary success cannot remove.

Yet the result differs. Eliot's gap produces continuing paralysis. Jibanananda's gap produces a fatal decision. In both cases, the missing bridge is meaning. Meaning is what allows an idea to become a purposeful act and what allows love, work, and family to become a life one can inhabit.

7. Death, the Morgue, and the Border of Meaning

Death is present in both poems, but it occupies a different level. Eliot creates symbolic regions: "death's dream kingdom," "death's other Kingdom," and "death's twilight kingdom" (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). These places sound like an afterlife, yet their borders are uncertain. The hollow men have not reached the direct vision of the dead, and they fear the final meeting. They remain between spiritual death and possible judgment.

Jibanananda gives death a physical address: "লাশকাটা ঘর," the dissecting room or morgue. The corpse lies flat on a table. Its mouth is bloody; the room is airless and material. There is no soft romantic picture of death. The body resembles a crushed or plague-struck rat. Death may stop exhaustion, but it also reduces the human body to damaged matter.

7.1 Death as Uncertainty and the Appearance of Release

In Eliot, death does not guarantee peace. The speakers imagine kingdoms of death, but those spaces contain fear, broken columns, fading stars, and avoided eyes. The religious vocabulary suggests that death may bring judgment rather than simple release. Therefore, the hollow men's condition is not solved by dying. Their crisis concerns their inability to become spiritually alive before death.

In Jibanananda, the morgue appears to contain no exhaustion: "লাশকাটা ঘরে / সেই ক্লান্তি নাই" ["In the morgue / that exhaustion is absent"] (Das, 1944, pp. 25–27). This statement can make death appear as release, but the poem surrounds that appearance with irony. The dead man cannot experience relief because he cannot feel anything. The phrase describes absence, not positive peace. The morgue removes pain by removing the person who experiences it.

This difference is ethically important. The poem understands why death might be imagined as sleep, but it does not prove that death answers life's question. The natural world keeps offering images of continuation: the frog asks for another dawn, the mosquito loves the stream of life, insects fly into sunlight, and the dragonfly fights in a child's hand. The man's death and nature's appetite remain side by side without easy reconciliation.

7.2 Neither Poem is Simply Nihilistic

Nihilism, in its simplest sense, claims that no meaning or value exists. Neither poem fully makes that claim. Eliot's symbols of the eyes, star, rose, prayer, and kingdom preserve the idea that truth and transcendence may exist. The hollow men fail to reach them, but failure of access is not proof of nonexistence.

Jibanananda also avoids complete negation. The poem gives serious attention to a death wish, but its energy comes from the noisy persistence of life. Ray's reading is helpful here: the poem's many voices and nature's cruelty complicate any single philosophical conclusion (Ray,

2015, pp. 151–170). The owl's hunger, the mosquito's struggle, and the frog's desire are not sentimental hope. They show that life continues without waiting for a human explanation.

Camus argues that awareness of absurdity need not end in self-destruction; it can become the starting point for living without false comfort (Camus, 1991). Jibanananda's poem does not state this philosophy, but its structure performs a related refusal. It looks directly at suicide, then keeps looking at life. Eliot similarly looks at a spiritually empty world while leaving incomplete symbols of another kingdom. Both poems remain tragic, but neither closes the door on value.

8. Nature: Dead Land and Abundant Life

The sharpest visible contrast between the poems appears in their landscapes. Eliot writes, "This is the dead land / This is cactus land" (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). Dryness spreads through voices, grass, cellar, land, and stone. The stars fade or die. The valley is hollow. Nature has become an image of spiritual infertility.

The cactus can survive in dryness, but it does not create abundance in this poem. It replaces the green mulberry tree in the children's rhyme echoed by "Here we go round the prickly pear." Childhood play has entered a desert. The repetition sounds comic and mechanical, suggesting a ritual whose original meaning has been forgotten. Even play becomes spiritually empty.

Jibanananda's night is dark and frightening, but it is full of movement. The owl wakes, the frog begs, the mosquito struggles, the fly returns to sunlight, insects move in golden waves, the dragonfly trembles, the tree stands, and fireflies gather. The dead man is still, but almost everything around him is alive.

8.1 Nature as Counter-Force, Not Comfort

It would be easy to say that Eliot's nature is negative and Jibanananda's nature is positive. The truth is more complex. Jibanananda's creatures survive through hunger, blood, and struggle. The mosquito wants blood. The owl welcomes darkness in order to catch mice. A child grips a dragonfly that fights death. Nature is vibrant, but it is not gentle.

This is why nature acts as a counter-force rather than a comforting answer. It challenges the dead man's rejection of life, but it does not explain his consciousness. The poem even admits that the life of the dragonfly and robin has not met human life. Animals follow appetite and cycle; humans know that they live and know that they will die. That knowledge can turn existence into a question.

In Eliot, human barrenness spreads outward until the land itself appears dead. In Jibanananda, human death remains surrounded by nonhuman vitality. Eliot's landscape mirrors the speakers, while Jibanananda's landscape resists the dead man. This different use of nature can be read as suggesting different versions of modern crisis: Eliot imagines a symbolic world infected by spiritual emptiness, whereas Jibanananda imagines a human crisis that nature neither shares nor cures.

8.2 Stone Images and the Ashwattha Tree

Objects of worship or reverence also differ. Eliot's stone images receive the prayer of a dead man's hand. Lips that might kiss instead pray to "broken stone" (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). The spiritual object cannot answer. Human tenderness has been redirected toward fragments.

Jibanananda's man approaches an ashwattha tree with a rope. The tree is living, rooted, culturally resonant, and capable in the narrator's imagination of protest. The speaker asks whether its branches objected and whether fireflies gathered like golden flowers. Nature appears as witness. Yet the tree cannot physically stop the act. Its life makes the death more painful, not impossible.

Broken stone and living tree therefore occupy related but opposite positions. Eliot's figures ask dead matter for spiritual response. Jibanananda's figure uses living nature in the act of death, while the poem imagines nature protesting. One world lacks a responsive life; the other contains life that cannot fully reach the human mind.

9. Human Time and Natural Time

Time becomes painful when it loses direction. Eliot suddenly inserts the statement “Life is very long” into the repeated movement of the Shadow passage (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). The sentence reverses the familiar saying that life is short. A meaningful life may feel short because purpose gives movement to time. A life without fulfilment becomes long because every desire is delayed and every transition fails.

The hollow men’s time does not develop. They circle the prickly pear “At five o’clock in the morning,” a moment that should announce dawn, but no new day truly begins (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). Their movement is circular rather than forward. Prayer begins and breaks. The world ends through repetition and a weak sound. Time continues, but history has lost purpose.

Jibanananda’s poem also represents human time as a burden. The dead man no longer has to carry “জানিবার গাঢ় বেদনার / অবিরাম—অবিরাম ভার” [“the deep pain of knowing, / the endless—endless weight”] (Das, 1944, pp. 25–27). The title’s eight-year distance shows that the narrator has carried the memory long after the event. Human time includes recollection, anticipation, regret, and the knowledge of death.

Natural time works differently. The moon sets, dawn is expected, sunlight returns, insects fly, and the owl hunts each night. The frog asks for another morning, not for an eternal explanation. These cycles do not solve mortality; they absorb death into continuation. One creature dies, while other creatures keep moving through hunger, darkness, and light.

The contrast can be expressed as human time versus natural time. Human time is represented as reflective and therefore capable of becoming a burden. Natural time is represented as cyclical and capable of continuing without a theory of meaning. Jibanananda does not say that humans should simply become animals. He says that human life has not met the life of the dragonfly and robin. The gap remains. Consciousness gives humans memory, poetry, ethics, and love, but it also gives them the ability to experience existence as a problem.

Eliot’s speakers are also self-conscious, yet their awareness does not become responsible freedom. Sartre’s claim that people form themselves through choice helps expose their crisis: the hollow men possess possibilities but refuse the acts through which a self might take shape (Sartre, 2007, p. 22). Their time remains a waiting room. Jibanananda’s man chooses, but his fatal choice ends every later possibility. In different ways, both poems show the danger of a broken relationship between freedom and time.

10. Faith, Transcendence, and the Location of Hope

Eliot’s poem is filled with Christian language that cannot reach completion. The phrase “For Thine is the Kingdom” comes from the Lord’s Prayer, but the poem breaks it into fragments: “For Thine is,” “Life is,” and “For Thine is the” (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). This is not an easy rejection of religion. A person who has forgotten prayer completely would not keep trying to speak it. The fragments show desire for transcendence together with incapacity.

The same double movement appears in the eyes and the “Multifoliate rose” (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). The rose can suggest heavenly order, divine love, or a completed spiritual vision. It is called the hollow men’s “hope,” but the hope remains distant. Scofield’s description of the poem as both an ending and a possible beginning is useful here. The old spiritual world has broken, but new orientation has not yet been achieved (Scofield, 1988, pp. 137–166).

Jibanananda’s poem does not organize its crisis through Christian judgment or redemption. God is not offered as an explicit answer. The poem’s larger order is natural, bodily, and mysterious. Blood, moonlight, insects, sleep, hunger, and memory carry its thought. Transcendence, if the word can be used, appears through the speaker’s widened relation to nonhuman life rather than through a clearly named heaven.

At the end, the speaker addresses the old owl as “প্রগাঢ় পিতামহী” [“deep old grandmother”] and imagines growing old beside it (Das, 1944, pp. 25–27). This strange kinship joins human mortality to nature’s duration. The owl is blind and old, yet it continues to change its eyes,

speak, hunt, and enjoy the night. The speaker does not receive a doctrine, but the scene can be read as placing his own mortality within a larger storehouse of life.

Hope is therefore located differently in the two poems. Eliot preserves broken spiritual hope: the kingdom may exist, but the speakers cannot enter its order. Jibanananda can be read as preserving biological and poetic continuation: one person is dead, yet life remains abundant enough to be watched, questioned, and spoken about eight years later. Neither hope is easy. Eliot's is distant; Jibanananda's is morally indifferent. Still, both resist total nothingness.

11. The Endings: Whimper and “জীবনের প্রচুর ভাঁড়ার”

Eliot ends with one of modern poetry's most remembered statements: the world ends “Not with a bang but a whimper” (Eliot, 1963, pp. 89–92). A “bang” would give history dramatic closure. A “whimper” is weak, private, and incomplete. It fits people whose gestures do not become motion and whose prayer does not become belief. The line expands the speakers' weakness into an image of civilizational ending.

The ending is powerful partly because it shrinks the scale. The poem has spoken of kingdoms, stars, death, and the world, but the final sound is small. Catastrophe does not need grandeur. A world may end through loss of courage, meaning, and connection. The hollow men do not destroy it through violent action; they allow it to fade through spiritual inability.

Jibanananda ends very differently. The speaker continues to look at the owl night after night. He imagines becoming old and, together with the owl, leaving “জীবনের প্রচুর ভাঁড়ার” [“life's abundant storehouse”] (Das, 1944, pp. 25–27). The phrase joins death and abundance. In this article's reading, the speaker and owl will also leave, while the image of the storehouse suggests a life-world not exhausted by their departure.

This is not a cheerful ending. The narrator knows that he too will age and die. Yet his imagined companionship with the owl makes mortality shared rather than solitary. The poem that began with a corpse ends with a living speaker imagining his future inside nature, suggesting that one death does not exhaust the life represented around it.

The endings therefore reveal a central difference between the poems: Eliot moves from collective hollowness toward the imagined weakening of a whole world. Jibanananda moves from an individual death toward the continuing abundance of life. One ends in a final weak sound; the other ends in a storehouse that still contains more. Eliot's ending is civilizational and spiritual. Jibanananda's is individual, biological, and cyclical.

12. Comparative Discussion

The comparison can now be gathered around seven connected findings:

First, both poems separate mere survival from meaningful life. Eliot's people live without a spiritual centre. Jibanananda's man possesses the common supports of life but cannot experience them as enough. Both poets reject the childish equation that having a body, a home, or a routine automatically means living well.

Second, the poems create different inner structures. Eliot's governing image is hollowness. The self is a shell filled with straw. Jibanananda's governing condition is weariness. The self contains a perilous wonder that moves through the blood and makes consciousness heavy. In short, Eliot describes absence; Jibanananda describes excess.

Third, speech fails in opposite ways. Eliot's speakers talk, but their voices are dry and meaningless. Jibanananda's dead man cannot talk, but his silence generates a complicated conversation among narrator, memory, animals, objects, and readers. Eliot shows language losing meaning inside life. Jibanananda shows death producing a continuing demand for meaning.

Fourth, the relation between vision and action differs. Eliot's speakers avoid the eyes that might reveal truth. Their idea, emotion, and desire cannot cross the Shadow into action. Jibanananda's man seems overwhelmed by awareness and carries that pressure into a final act. Eliot's consciousness produces paralysis; Jibanananda's produces exhaustion. Neither response gives healthy freedom.

Fifth, death occupies different spaces. Eliot's death kingdoms are symbolic and spiritual borderlands. The hollow men fear judgment and cannot secure redemption. Jibanananda's morgue is material: a corpse lies on a table. Death appears to end exhaustion, yet the damaged body and continuing natural world complicate any reading of it as a triumphant escape.

Sixth, nature changes the philosophical atmosphere. Eliot's land mirrors human dryness: dead land, cactus, broken stone, and dying stars. Jibanananda's nature contradicts human despair through fierce vitality. The frog, mosquito, owl, insect, tree, and firefly do not explain why a reflective human being should live, but their persistence suggests that one person's despair is not the whole of the life represented by the poem.

Seventh, the poems locate hope differently. Eliot's star, rose, eyes, prayer, and kingdom preserve a broken possibility of transcendence. Jibanananda's dawns, sunlight, creatures, and abundant storehouse can be read as preserving the continuity of life. Eliot's hope is spiritually higher but inaccessible. Jibanananda's hope is physically near but indifferent to human pain.

These findings support the article's strongest formulation: Eliot asks what happens when people can no longer find a living connection among belief, desire, and action; Jibanananda asks what happens when human consciousness becomes too burdened to accept the life that nature continues to desire. The shared question is not simply "Why die?" It is "What makes life inhabitable?"

13. Findings

The analysis identifies a shared modernist problem: biological existence can persist without an experienced sense of meaning. Its comparative contribution lies in locating that fracture differently across the poems and tracing how voice, vision, death, nature, and time alter its significance. Eliot's symbolic world keeps transcendence present but difficult to reach; in this article's reading, Jibanananda's retrospective narration and surrounding natural life keep continuation and memory in view without turning the man's death into a solution.

14. Conclusion

Read together, "The Hollow Men" and "আট বছর আগের একদিন" suggest that biological survival and meaningful life can come apart, but they represent that separation through different poetic structures. Eliot's collective speakers remain physically alive while belief, speech, and action fail to cohere; Jibanananda begins from a death that unsettles the ordinary assurances of love, family, hope, and material security.

The comparison becomes clearest in the poems' treatment of action, death, and the nonhuman world. Eliot's speakers remain suspended before judgment and transcendence, whereas Jibanananda's poem presents a fatal act without treating it as a successful answer to exhaustion. The morgue removes sensation, not the question that the death raises, while animals, trees, dawns, and the remembered voice continue around that absence. In this article's reading, such continuation complicates despair rather than resolving it.

The comparative contribution, then, is not a single definition of modern despair but an account of two different failures of inhabitable meaning. Eliot dramatizes a broken relation among belief, desire, and action; Jibanananda explores the pressure of consciousness when familiar supports no longer seem sufficient. Neither poem supplies a final solution. Their different endings keep the question of how a life becomes meaningful open, in Eliot through incomplete signs of transcendence, and in Jibanananda through remembered mortality within an ongoing natural world.

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