

DEATH AS PERCEIVED IN THE WORKS OF JOHN DONNE, EMILY DICKINSON AND JOHN KEATS

Sreevidhya S
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Agurchand Manmull Jain college
Meenambakkam Chennai

ABSTRACT

Human life has gone through long experiences. The journey continues but the destination that all humans imagine is the eternal place. There is a large supposition that human life does not end with death. It is deemed or at least some wish to believe that there is a life after death. It is a journey back to where we belonged and to where no one can accompany. Beyond religions and beliefs this is the truth. Death is as true as the positive energy that is protecting the beliefs of the people. Being worthy of eternity is something that everyone talks about, but never ready to face. Facing death with no fear means absurdity to some, and to some others it is considered as having attained *moksha*. This paper aims to highlight the different perceptions of poets, about death.

KEY WORDS: God, death, birth, life, fear, poets

INTRODUCTION

Death is not the greatest feat on the list of accomplishments. It is undoubtedly unearthly, a connection to the supreme through the soul. Death is faced in every family and yet the meaning stands obscure, because no dead person comes back to explain the final achievement and how to accomplish it. Humanity without death will lead to arrogance and the end of nobility. There is gratitude towards God for all the infinite achievements from birth, at the time of death. The only act of showing gratitude is giving away the whole self to the Creator. This is however considered as the highest of giving, than any other sacrifice. Whereas the truth is that what we give back is less than what we get. The question of how much more can we give remains unanswered as we are forced to give away all that is remaining within our hold- which is our breath and life on earth.

The meaning of death has been beautifully portrayed by several poets and writers. Life is a partnership of experiences with many known, many related and many other acquaintances. The problem of existence lies between the preparation for life and a journey towards death. In the struggle towards preparing for a better life, man fails to realize that his

life on earth is already on the road to death where a return journey is not booked. The mercy of God on man lies in the way, man behaves on earth and is free to use his will. When man grows old, the time remaining for him is waning and death pushes him to some final accomplishments. Regardless of the health and other disabilities he tries to adopt healthier lifestyles with a view to extend life on earth. This is rather an attempt to ensure that death is less painful.

“‘Death-Related Attitudes and Death Anxiety: A Comprehensive Review,’ a chapter by Tomer, points out that death-related attitudes have a cognitive component that connects death to our lives. Research indicates that older persons are more likely to be anxious about death when they have lower levels of ego integrity, a high number of physical problems, psychological problems, lack of religious beliefs (not religious behaviors), or are being institutionalized”. (Adrian Tomer)

In Emily Dickinson’s poem, *Because I Could Not Stop For Death*, the poet personifies Death as a character who waits patiently for her to accompany. The use of *He* shows the personification of Death as a male character. The poem explains beautifully the chill experience of afterlife, visiting the most visited places. The gentleman is not in a hurry to take her away, but in reality, Death does not wait for anyone. The tone of the poem is natural and death is presented as a comforter who does not mind waiting in his carriage to take her. The carriage is immortality and the person being carried in it is given all final respects. Emily Dickinson writes the poem as if she was able to return after having experienced the journey called Death.

The poem gives an awe feeling of listening to a person who explains the arrival of death and how she runs to enter the carriage leaving all her chores behind. The destination is not chosen by the traveler, and the journey cannot be postponed. The whole life on earth is never relished and is always fretted and feared thinking about this one final day. The mysterious life after death unfolds from the moment the traveler clasps the eternal hands which is tight and never released. The wheels of the carriage are circular which also indicate the circular phase of life. We come from nothingness and we return to nothingness. The poet explains the nothingness that is there in the innocent minds of the children who play during the recess in school. It points out the days missed that went unnoticed, yet enjoyed unknowingly. There is a yearning to relive those days and when the poet passes through those

places in the carriage, feels nostalgic. The setting sun signifies death; whereas the gazing grain refers to life after death. “*We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –We passed the Setting Sun*”

The swelling of the ground where the roof is hardly seen is the grave; her own grave—the reality of death striking her mind suddenly. She finds her own grave – the house for her body to dwell. The rest remains unchanged symbolizing the truth that everything else will go on even after a person’s absence.

We paused before a House that seemed

A Swelling of the Ground –

The Roof was scarcely visible –

The Cornice – in the Ground – (Emily Dickinson)

There is mystery and uncertainty in everyone’s life and nobody welcomes death as a gentleman who takes us away with all civility and patience around the corner to watch all the scenes that would be missed and erased soon.

While Emily Dickinson visualizes death as a gentleman, John Keats has fears in mind about his unpredictable death. “*When I have fears that I may cease to be Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain*” (John Keats). Death and birth must be viewed similarly. It does not happen to all at once. Every living species has its own time destined to die. According to few other poets like Donne, death need not override in pride of creating fear to all. It is only a peaceful sleep, waking into the reality of the eternal. It is a transition that takes place in everyone’s life- a transformation to an immortal place where there is no fear of power and people. It is a spiritual conflict between life on earth and life after life. Robert Browning mentions in a poem that he wants to die a bold death, facing it cold and brave as if it is a jocund company.

Death is the greatest fear man has to conquer. One must be ready to face death because it comes to the one who is most fit to face it. Money cannot buy everything in this world. There are things that cannot be bought or replaced. Medicines can be bought, things can be exchanged, bought or replaced; but death cannot. There is a lot of difference in the way that modern day poets and old poets express their views about death. Some people fail to understand that there is selfishness in everyday life. There is satisfaction when something wrong doesn’t happen to a closest kin or neighbor. But it becomes hard to digest when one is affected by it, worst. Death symbolizes darkness, whereas it is a path to heaven. It restores heavenly peace to the soul. As long as a man remains engrossed in material wealth, he will

not understand eternity. Heaven is a fascination for the present when people are focused in carpe diem. God has allowed us to spend some days on earth for a limited period of time. Just as a mother expects her child back home, God expects us back to his home.

Keats has revealed this in his poem, *When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be*. He wishes to remain on earth until at least he has fulfilled all his dreams. He praises God for the lovely Nature and the exuberant life that is waiting for him. Unfortunately, he is crest fallen due to tuberculosis that is reducing his days on earth. Love, fame, beauty and wealth are all transitory. These are momentary pleasures that man runs for, thinking he can rest the whole of his old age. Keats was very upset about the prediction of his early death caused by his illness. He does not want to miss all the wonders of life and wants to transcribe everything into words before he prepares for death. There is insecurity in the lines of Keats when he says he may not live to see the beautiful earth. “*And think that I may never live to trace Their shadows with the magic hand of chance*” Chance is personified to have a magic hand that can allow him to see various things on earth. Life on earth sinks to a sea of nothingness according to the presumptions of human thought. Whereas there are poets who have dared to write about death as nothing to be afraid of. In the poems of Donne, there are instances where he asks death never to hold too much pride for creating fear in the minds of people. It is not the all-powerful character like a villain in a movie, but it is just a passage to eternity- a way through which one can be transported to the immortal life. One striking example of Donne’s poem is, *Death Be Not Proud*. This Holy sonnet is in contrast to the poem of Keats.

According to Donne, death is something that can visit a person only once and cannot control people all the time. It is controlled by fate and luck and hence the poet wonders why death holds too much pride. “*why swell'st thou then?*” whereas the poem of Keats strikes his fear in the opening lines itself. He says, “*When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be*” Donne deflates the pride of death by calling it a peaceful rest or just a sleep that is required after a long hours of work. It is not strong or something to be boasted of. It is only a pitiable figure, “poor death”. Hence the idea of death as omnipotent or frightening does not become very important. The poem is written to remove fear from minds that dread the arrival of death anytime in life. In the alarm of its arrival, they fail to enjoy life’s simplest beauties and joys. Death is just an aggressor that frightens people and enjoys the fear in the face of people. Nevertheless, it is just misplacing people from one mortal place to the other immortal place. In fact, it is helping one to remain connected with the immortal for the rest of the life.

Death Be Not Proud is not a contradictory poem denying the existence of death completely. While Emily Dickinson wrote on the journey after death through a journey in the carriage, Donne hope to mention rightly that there is no might in death. It is just the same as birth, which the human mind refuses to accept. When a child is born it brings happiness. However, death does not. On the other hand, by dying on earth, it is presumed that the afterlife begins in an unknown place. The poet personifies death to be in argument with him and boldly states that death cannot feel proud. He strongly claims death is like the sleep caused by poppy seeds or charms. “*And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well, And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?*” Donne calls death to be the short sleep that wakes us into eternity and cannot die anymore. *One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*

CONCLUSION

Death gives sufferings and sorrows, but birth brings joy. They are the two side of the coin called life. Our life is the time taken to toss over to the other side- from birth to death. Once the coin is tossed, we experience death. It is commonly disagreed that we also suffer after birth. Life is not just full of laughter and happiness. It teaches to cry out loud as well as to laugh out loud. It sounds appropriate to say that “I am dying” but nobody keeps mentioning “I am living”. It is when there is fear of death that a person begins to take care of life and people around him. There is better appreciation in achievements and there is more love for people. When we love we suffer to enjoy and in death we only suffer. There are people to love each other, but there is none to die along. Life triggers fear of death but death transforms us completely to another part of immortal life.

WORKS CITED:

Howard, James. "Because I could not stop for Death —." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Jan 2019. Web. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/because-i-could-not-stop-for-death>

Howard, James. "Death, be not proud." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Jan 2019. Web. <<https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/john-donne/death-be-not-proud>>

Poetry Foundation. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by R.W. Franklin* (Harvard University Press, 1999) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47652/because-i-could-not-stop-for-death-479>

Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45099/sonnet-73-that-time-of-year-thou-mayst-in-me-behold>

Psychosocial Aspects Of Death And Dying Death Attitudes and the Older Adult: Theories, Concepts, and Applications, edited by Adrian Tomer. Brunner-Routledge Publishers, Florence, KY, 2000, 293 pp.,