To Dread or Not to Dread: A Look at Fearing Death in Poetry

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During the trial that determined his fateful end, the philosopher Socrates said, “To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils.” In the face of death, Socrates found ambiguity where others saw dread for the inevitable outcome of all who walk the Earth. He explained that he believed that death could mean either one of two notions- “a complete lack of perception, like a dreamless sleep” or “a relocating for the soul from here to another place." This idea of what comes after death, and if people should fear it, has consumed the minds of many others, before and after Socrates. Death has plagued not only the history of humanity but also lies in between the lines of some of the greatest works of art. Two poets in particular, though 200 years apart, fixated much of their writings on the concept of mortality. John Donne, an Angelican cleric of the 16th century, and Emily Dickinson, a poet of the 19th century, took stances similar to that of Socrates. No stranger to demise, both Dickinson and Donne lived in times where mortality rates were high- Donne lost his wife during childbirth and Dickinson watched her parents, closest friends and mentors pass away- which affected their writings and outlooks on death. John Donne’s “[Death, be not proud]” and Emily Dickinson’s “[Because I could not stop for Death]” both convey the belief that one should not hold fear in the face of death through the use of imagery, rhyme, meter, and theme.

In John Donne’s “[Death, be not proud]”, Donne paints the notion through imagery that one should not hold fear in the face of death. He uses personification to personify the idea of death into a character of its own and utilizes an apostrophe to have the speaker address ‘Death’ directly: “Death, be not proud, though some have called thee/ Mighty and dreadful, for thou are

not so;". The first lines also reveal to the reader that in this controlling metaphor, 'Death' is an arrogant being who holds a reputation of being powerful and grim. Another use of metaphor lies within the comparison of death to "rest and sleep", relating the relaxation of napping to passing away. The speaker also juxtaposes death to the likes of a "slave to Fate, Chance, Kings, and Desperate men," reducing death's bravado to the insignificance of a tool for other forces. "Fate", which Donne also personifies, weaves the story of each person from birth to death and holds the true power of determining one's demise. "Chance", personified as well, uses death when situations occur, incidentally. Kings control the deaths of their people, whether it be through war or execution. Desperate people can take matters of life and death into their own hands when they reach their breaking points. The speaker continues his taunting of death by comparing his ability to put people in a 'sleep' to the likes of drugs and magic: "And poppy'or charms can make us sleep as well/ and better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?" The speaker then says, "One short sleep past, we wake eternally", depicting death as nothing but a "short sleep." Using these various forms of imagery, Donne conveys the idea that one should not fear death.

In Emily Dickinson's "[Because I could not stop for death]", Dickinson also illustrates through imagery the idea that one should not fear death. Dickson utilizes multiple controlling and extended metaphors to convey the speaker's reflection of their journey to the ongoing end. One of the controlling metaphors she uses lies within her personification of Death, portrayed as a gentleman who "kindly stopped for" her when she could not stop for him. The capitalization of "Carriage" in line 3 reveals an extended metaphor that carries death like a hearse to a final resting place. The third stanza begins with "We passed the School, where Children strove" and ends with "We passed the Setting Sun-" as an extended metaphor that this ride encapsulates the

beginning of life at birth to the end of life through the setting sun. This leads into the fourth stanza that says “Or rather- He passed Us” that describes how life seems to pass before people’s eyes. In the fifth stanza, the speaker and Death “paused before a House that seemed/ A Swelling of the Ground-/ The Roof was scarcely visible- The Cornice- in the Ground-/” The capitalization of “House” and the description of it in the ground reveal to the reader that it reflects the final resting place and the speaker compares it to the likes of a coffin. The sixth and final stanza ends on the word “Eternity”, which Dickinson capitalized, and ties back to the use of “Immortality” as the last word of the first stanza to reflect the idea that people should not see death as the end of mortality, rather the beginning of immortality in the afterlife. Using multiple forms of imagery. Dickinson furthers the notion that one should not fear death.

In “[Death, be not proud]”, Donne uses rhyme schemes to further the concept that one should not fear death. Donne employs a Petrarchan sonnet, which typically follows a ABBAABBA then CDCDCD. However, Donne changes the rhyme scheme in the last two lines, making it CDCDCDAE. This allows the last word, “die”, to have more of an impact on the reader, emphasizing that one should not fear death because, in the end, death will die too. In “[Because I could not stop for Death]”, Dickinson also uses rhyme schemes to further the idea that one should not fear death. The first stanza has a perfect ABCB rhyme scheme, but as the speaker goes on, Dickson uses slanted rhymes in the second and fourth lines of stanzas 2, 4, 5, and 6- like “away” and “civility” in stanza 2, lines 6-8. Dickinson also incorporates internal rhymes in lines 3, 5, 11, and 14- like line 3’s “The Carriage held but just Ourselves.” The rhyme creates an almost calming effect that allows the reader to subdue their fear of death and goes along with Dickinson’s metaphor of death being a kind gentleman. Her break of perfect scheme

to slanted rhymes reflect the speaker's increasing distance from life and its normal patterns. With the use of rhyme schemes within the poems, the poets both make the case that one should not fear death.

In "[Death, be not proud]", Donne uses meter to develop the notion that one should not fear death. Donne works with an iambic pentameter in the poem, using 10 syllables in each line and having an unstressed then stressed syllable pattern. Donne follows this form loosely, as the poem starts on a stressed syllable in the word "Death", putting emphasis on who the speaker intends the message to go to. In "[Because I could not stop for Death]", Dickinson also uses meter to develop the idea that one should not fear death. Dickinson alternates between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter each line in each stanza using the same unstressed then stressed syllable pattern. Her use of a common meter within the form adds to the serene tone of the poem and makes it sound like a nursery rhyme. The utilization of meter within the poems allows the poets to convey the idea that one should not fear death.

In "[Death, be not proud]", Donne develops the theme that one should not fear death. The poem starts as the speaker addresses death directly as he says, "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee/ Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;" in a taunting manner that makes the reader feel as though the speaker may actually be able to stand up to the being. The speaker goes on to further the idea that he has no need to fear 'Death' and goes as far to patronize the great being: "For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow/ Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me". He reduces death to the comfort found in a night of sleep in the line "From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,/ Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,". He says, "And soonest our best men with thee do go,/ Rest of their bones, and

soul's delivery" to reflect on how, even if the good die young, they can find peace as they rest in the afterlife. He then mocks death, telling him he lives in the shadows as a slave of greater forces like "...Fate, Chance, Kings, and desperate men" and makes fun of the crowd death hangs around: "And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell". The speaker then reflects on death's insignificance and arrogance as he thinks "poppy'or charms can make us sleep as well/ And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?"". In the last lines, "One short sleep past, we wake eternally,/ And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die." Donne ends the speaker's argument with the last two lines that paint death as a nap that leads to a new beginning of an eternal afterlife where death no longer has anyone to kill, ergo death itself ceases to exist. Donne paints the theme of mortality within the poem to further the concept that one should not fear death.

In "[Because I could not stop for Death]", Dickinson develops the theme that one should not fear death. The poem starts as the speaker describes death's act of kindness, "Because I could not stop for Death –/ He kindly stopped for me –", an allusion to the idea that one does not choose when death comes, but when he does, he will do so as a gentleman. The speaker goes on, "The Carriage held but just Ourselves –/ And Immortality," showing the reader that this hearse of a carriage not only carries death and the speaker but also eternal life. Dickinson further develops the theme within the description of the ride in the next lines "We slowly drove – He knew no haste/ And I had put away/ My labor and my leisure too,/ For His Civility –"as a way to let the reader see that death comes slow in a comforting way where one no longer worries of work or activities. The speaker sets the scene, painting a calming picture as they "passed the School, where Children strove/ At Recess – in the Ring –/ We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain–/We

passed the Setting Sun –". The poem then takes a turn, becoming just a little darker as the sun "...passed Us/ –The Dews drew quivering and Chill/ –For only Gossamer, my Gown –/ My Tippet – only Tulle –" leaving chills down the spine of the reader. After the speaker and death "paused before a House that seemed/ A Swelling of the Ground –/ The Roof was scarcely visible –/ The Cornice – in the Ground –" which the reader can see as the final resting place, the speaker then goes on to say "Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet/ Feels shorter than the Day/ I first surmised the Horses' Heads/ Were toward Eternity –" letting the reader know the speaker reflects on the past in this poem, and the reader can assume that since the speaker still describes death as a kind gentleman centuries later, he must not be such a bad guy after all. Dickinson exemplifies the idea that one should not fear death through her running themes of mortality.

As time passes, humankind will still speculate if they should fear death and what comes after it. Both John Donne's "[Death, be not proud]"- describing death as an arrogant punk who does not live up to his reputation of intimidation- and Emily Dickinson's "[Because I could not stop for Death]"- describing death as a kind-hearted gentleman escorting one to their final resting place in eternity- utilize imagery, rhyme scheme, meter, and thematic messages to convey the theme that one should not fear death. They speculate on what comes after, whether it be never ending sleep or immortality within an eternal afterlife, but only the dead hold the answers to that. As Socrates said, "Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god."

References

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