

# Sharpio's auto wreck: the theme of death

[Life](#), [Death](#)



Sharpio's "Auto Wreck": The Theme of Death Few subjects can be discussed with more insightfulness and curiosity

than death. The unpredictability and grimness of it are conveyed well in Karl Shapiro's poem, "Auto Wreck". The poem starts with a description of an ambulance rushing to the scene of a crash, and hurriedly gathering up the victims and rushing them away. The aftermath of the police investigation that

follows leaves the crowd gathered around the scene to explore privately and individually a range of feelings and emotions about the reality of death.

Shapiro's usage of imagery together with figurative language is a key element in

getting the theme of death across to the reader. By bringing the scene of the

accident to life and relaying the emotions of the spectators with language and

several metaphors, the poem gains a realistic and sometimes transcendent effect.

In some places in the poem, the words can easily be taken literally to convey

scenery or an emotion, but they can also be taken so as to make the reader think

about possible higher meanings. The thoughts expressed in the poem help to suggest these other meanings by clearly stating what is being felt by the speaker and the crowd around the accident. By stating clearly and vividly the

emotions of the scene, it is easy for the reader to identify the theme itself, and also to identify with it.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes the ambulance arriving on the scene more so than the actual scene itself. The ambulance is described using

words such as "wings", "dips", and "floating", giving the impression of the hectic nature of its business at an accident. When the ambulance arrives and

breaks through the crowd, "the doors leap open" to further convey the hurried

state it's in. In line 5, as the ambulance passes the beacons and illuminated clocks, it gives the reader an obvious clue about setting. To take the words' meaning further, it can be argued that the illumination of the clocks and the

emptying light in line 8 symbolize life itself as light in an otherwise dark

situation. Also, the allusion to a heart by use of the words "pulsing",

"artery" and "beating" personify the ambulance as the new life giving support of

the victims of the crash. The doors in line 14 being an "afterthought" and being closed makes the impression that death did actually occur at the scene,

which is grimly described in the second stanza. The words themselves continue to

give clues about the theme in line 11 which reads, "Then the bell, breaking the

hush, tolls once." I saw this line as an allusion to an old expression taken

from poetry for the unpredictability of death, "for whom the bell tolls". The expression emphasizes the fact that no one knows who will be next in line for fate to meet them in a grim way, and this allusion gives the last two stanzas more effectiveness when the feelings are expressed by the speaker.

In the second stanza, the actual words are not the main reflection of the theme of the poem as much as the imagery itself. The reader gets the clue

that the speaker is actually at the scene reacting to it simply by the word "We"

in the first line. When the scene is described there is mention of "pools of blood" and glass being swept away by seemingly unfeeling policemen, described in

line 16 as "large and composed". The speaker feels deranged walking among these

cops and actually feeling the gravity of the situation, while the police go on about their business not expressing any remorse. They make notes and hang

lanterns and just do their job. Again, the "pools of blood" is the best example

of imagery reflecting theme by explaining the grimness present at an auto wreck.

The reaction to the wreck and imagery created in this stanza present a good basis for the feelings expressed in the last stanza.

The reader can identify with the theme of the poem in the last stanza with the imagery and figurative language both expressing it very clearly. In lines 22 through 27, the speaker speaks on behalf of the crowd in expressing the feeling after witnessing death. Through simile ("our throats were tight as tourniquets") and metaphor ("our feet were bound with splints") the feeling of shock and timidity to think about the reality of what the wreck really symbolizes is present. The feeling of timidity turns to a need to express feelings somehow by the witnesses, so they "speak through sickly smiles" and make "grim jokes". Through this interaction, though, the feeling that death can happen anywhere at any time starts to set with the crowd, and also with the reader at this point. The speaker starts reflecting on the accident from line 31 through the rest of the poem, talking about the questions "Who shall die?" and "Who is innocent?". The randomness of death is further presented in lines 33 and 34, which basically mean that in this crash as opposed to war where death is imminent, and suicide where death has a reason and logic (both examples in the poem), the fatality was not necessary and not preventable either. Lines 35 through 39 also reflect theme by finally stating that death "invites the occult

mind" and "cancels our physics with a sneer". Taking the meaning from these parts and the last lines of the poem takes the speaker and reader through the realization that death is unpredictable and thought provoking, knowing that it can happen in the worst way at any given time.

"Auto Wreck" deals with the complex subject of death by exposing the reader to the feelings of the speaker after witnessing a crash. The theme that death is unpredictable and grim is presented through these feelings. The stanzas are set up such that the steps from shock to realization of what death contains can be presented in order of occurrence. The first stanza describes the ambulance coming to try to save the victims, and the second stanza deals with the immediate aftermath of the crash. These first two stanzas really create a background to the final stanza, which takes the reader through a range of emotions along with the speaker. The last stanza entirely is the perfect example of how the imagery and figurative language get these emotions across to the reader. In doing such, the theme is revealed very clearly and the reader can think to himself for whom the bell really tolls.

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