

Sophie and m. valdemar: two choices essay

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



Recently, the news has featured many stories about Brittany Maynard, a 29-year-old woman who recently chose to end her life because she had terminal brain cancer. In April 2014, she received a prognosis that gave her six months left in her life. In the meantime, her doctors recommended full radiation to the brain, which would singe her hair off and cover her scalp with first-degree burns. Also, there was no guarantee that the radiation would kill the tumor. The fact that her body was healthy and young meant that she was likely to survive physically long after her cancer had rendered her brain functionally useless, and so she moved to Oregon, where suicide is legal in cases of terminal disease, and ended her life in early November. The decisions that people make for themselves, regarding life and death, are of interest because death is one of the few frontiers about which we know relatively little. In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdamar" and William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, the central characters face the end of their lives in different ways. Poe and Styron represent the two stories differently in terms of description as well as theme.

Poe's story uses the power of vivid imagery to express the power of death. M. Valdamar is a terminal patient with tuberculosis, who has no more than one more day to live. This would be a particularly powerful antecedent for Poe, who as a toddler had to watch his mother die in her small apartment, coughing her lungs up a fragment at a time as a result of that same disease. The narrator has professed an ongoing interest in mesmerism, which was an early form of hypnotism. One difference between mesmerism and hypnotism is that mesmerists relied on the use of magnetism to lure patients into their state. M. Valdamar enters a hypnotic state before he dies, although while in

the trance he reports that he has actually died. The narrator keeps M. Valdamar in that state for seven months; for that whole time, the patient does not have any heartbeat or pulse, and he does not seem to be breathing. His skin remains pale and cold. When the narrator tries to wake the patient, he suddenly decays into a “nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable – putrescence” (Poe, web). It is descriptions of the gore that make this story such a powerful one. It is worth noting that Poe does not rely on his own imagination; the terminology suggests thorough study of medical textbooks. At one point, Valdamar’s eyes start dripping a “profuse outflowing of a yellowish ichor” (Poe, web). Also, once the narrator wakes Valdamar up, the body “within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk – crumbled – absolutely rotted away beneath [the narrator’s] hands” (Poe, web). While this sort of description is not particularly graphic to modern eyes, which have also read the works of such authors as Stephen King and seen horror films like those in the Saw cycle, it was utterly graphic during Poe’s time.

In Sophie’s Choice, the author relies on the power of the events rather than using especially vivid description to demonstrate the power of death. While the relationship among Stingo, Nathan and Sophie is dramatic enough, it is what Stingo learns from Sophie once they escape to Stingo’s father’s peanut farm that is the most shocking. Sophie survived the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz, but her children did not. At first, Stingo only knows that Sophie lost a child at the camp. However, he learns that she actually had two children and when she arrived at Auschwitz, the doctor forced her to choose one child to send to the gas chamber right away, while the other would live

as an inmate in the camp. She sacrificed her daughter, giving her a level of guilt that she could not overcome. She has fallen into a deep depression, which is why she has entered a suicide pact with Nathan, a brilliant genius who is also a paranoid schizophrenic. Stingo proposes marriage to Sophie, and they make love that night, but she leaves before he awakens and commits suicide with Nathan. It is the sheer power of this plot twist that shows the reader the power of death, whereas in Poe's story, it is the power of the description that makes the death seem so powerful.

The themes at work in Poe's story are different from those at work in Styron's story as well. In "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," the themes revolve around what happens to those who pursue scientific experiments that analyze the line between life and death. Poe is not the first to tackle this theme, of course; in Frankenstein, the monster comes to life after Dr. Frankenstein digs dead bodies up and assembles their parts to create a new being through the use of electricity. Indeed, his story was so realistic that many took it as a scientific case study. Thomas South, a British researcher, added the story to his book *Early Magnetism in its Higher Relations to Humanity*. However, as the truth emerged, revealing the story to be fiction, Philip Pendleton Cooke, a poet in Virginia, wrote a letter to Poe calling his story "the most damnable horrible, hair-lifting, shocking, ingenious chapter of fiction that any brain ever conceived or hand traced. That gelatinous, viscous sound of man's voice! There was never such an idea before" (Meyers, p. 179-180). While the description, as mentioned above, is certainly a reason behind the power of the story, it is the theme of interfering with the processes of life and death that also makes this a

powerful tale. When M. Valdamar's body collapses so spectacularly, that image delivers a resounding smash to the idea that humanity could transcend the line between life and death in any way. Also, the story has to do with the effectiveness of mesmerism as a practice. Hypnotism remains the subject of some controversy today, largely in part because of the claim that can influence the mind.

While "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdamar" revolves around questions of science, Sophie's Choice revolves around guilt. It appears that all of Sophie's decisions since escaping Nazi captivity have guilt as a common theme. She enters an odd relationship with Nathan, even though the only commonality they share appears to be a difficulty with dealing with reality. In Nathan's case, it is a severe instance of paranoid schizophrenia that makes dealing with life so difficult. Because of Nathan's demons, it is likely that Sophie feels more at home than she would with a person who has no demons to exorcise, because that would allow her to pursue her own troubled life without much scrutiny from her partner. Having chosen one child for the gas chamber (although the death of her son meant that the Nazis would have gotten her daughter too, eventually), she lives in a cycle of self-hatred and guilt that she simply cannot overcome. Even though Stingo offers her a way out - literally, by helping her leave New York for the farm in Virginia, and affectively, by proposing marriage - she does not leave, instead returning to New York to kill herself with Nathan. The theme here has to do with the destructive power of guilt. It is this one choice that Sophie made in her past that makes life in the present (let alone the future) intolerable. For M. Valdamar, there was no such guilt; his terminal state is what made him a

likely candidate for mesmerism, and the narrator feels no palpable guilt either, as the patient was already heading for death.

In “ The Facts of the Case of M. Valdamar” and Sophie’s Choice, both works feature a dramatic death that makes the ending of the novel even more gut-wrenching than the parts leading up to it. In terms of theme and vividness of description, the authors of these stories take different paths toward creating a powerfully descriptive tale. The power of death is an idea that appears in both stories; other than that, though, the narrative strategies and the thematic techniques vary – but even in their differences the stories linger in the reader’s memory long after the book has been put down.

Works Cited

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