

Death themes in literature, music, and art

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



Death has been a popular inspiration in literature, music, and art. It is quite a popularly used theme in the world of literature compared to other realms of art where the death theme is considered unconventional. Perhaps the most popular earliest of literature dealing with death can be traced to ancient myths. Perhaps the popularity of these literatures can be rooted to the fact that we humans need to find an outlet for tragic experiences like death. It can also be viewed that this is also a coping mechanism with our fear of the unknown, like the unknown realms of death.

Many great poets gained popularity through poems exploring the theme, such as Shakespeare, Dickinson, and Whitman. These poems usually explore the mystery of death and the realms of the unknown. They deal with the common metaphysical assumptions about death like the soul and ghosts. William Shakespeare had written one of his most popular works, Hamlet, with a theme of mystified death. Since the death of his father, Hamlet became obsessed with the idea of death and contemplated heavily on the thought of suicide giving way to the play's most famous soliloquy "to be, or not to be..."

The death theme is present in all forms of literature even in the genres of short story or novel. A popular mode of conflict in these kinds of stories is how the hero or heroine would avoid being killed, having to kill someone, or killing oneself. These kinds of stories, in my opinion, give the audience the effect of appreciating life more after being exposed to the threat of death. The most popular forms of written work dealing with the theme of death are elegies and eulogies. They may not be usually published and canonized, but

these are the genres that deal with death in the most deep and profound manner.

One of the most famous eulogies ever delivered was made by Percy Bysshe Shelley. " Life, a dome of many-colored glass, stains the white radiance of eternity" as he beautifully states. It has always bewildered me why sad songs are more popular than happy ones. Nothing could best death in the topic of sadness, and so songs about death are almost equal in popularity with death in the literature. Lyrics usually include subjects like death of a beloved one, a tribute to someone's death, and contemplation of crossing to the other side.

Suicide has been a popular subject in death inspired songs. Death inspired songs have found hostility from critics and listeners due to its violent themes. Sometimes, the thesis message is that death seems to be the only option for unbearable desolation and the gloomy human condition. It counters the unrealistic theme of mainstream songs that everyone is bound for a happy ending. Ironically, the pessimism of death inspired songs provides its followers strength in contrast to the optimism of the mainstream world.

Unconventionality may have been the ingredient for success of death inspired songs, plainly because being fresh and innovative in any form of art is always good. Perhaps the most popular offshoot of songs with death themes is known as " death metal. " Its typical characteristics are low-pitch singing, dark lyrics, fast-paced rhythm and unconventional structure. The most popular artists of this genre gained worldwide reputation by their

outrageous stage performances and lifestyle. The band Metallica is one of the most popular bands in this genre.

Some interpret their hit song "Enter Sandman" as inspired by the thought of death. The chorus of the song is, "exit light, enter night, take my hand, off to never never land." Many subculture groups have been a product of death themes popularity, including goths, emo punks, death metal rockers, and even religious cults. The death theme's influence has been present from early paintings and tattoos to photography and other modern forms of art. It has been popular and still continuing to gain popularity among art enthusiasts and critics of the present era.

It is stereotypical of these works to have blood, skulls, and shades of dark colors. But some paintings are innocent looking as in Vincent Van Gogh's "Sunflowers." Perhaps one of the most famous painters to work with death as a theme is the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch. The "Death of the mother" and "Death in the sick room", both done in the 1890's, are about the death of his mother due to tuberculosis when he was a young child and the death of his sister. These kinds of paintings were already present since ancient times. Some are about the death of mythological heroes and famous personalities in ancient history.

Many paintings portraying death stem from depressed times in history, such as times of war and political mayhem. These paintings, in a way, serve as historical records. Many of these paintings were done in a realistic discipline, though still there are many done in other artistic approaches. Some death inspired art are even of religious nature. The early church was unable to repress death as a theme even though they were very persistent, and so

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they surrendered and embraced it. Many Christian paintings were about the death and resurrection of Christ.

The red shades in these paintings are interpreted as Christ's sacrificial blood. These paintings were used to reinforce biblical messages like the death of Christ. The religious use of death theme paintings is not exclusive to the Christian faith. Other religions expressed their view of the afterlife through paintings. There are many paintings about heaven and hell. " Nothing can happen more beautiful than death," according to Walt Whitman. It is often stated that art is an imitation of life, and so naturally, art includes death since it is a part of life.

The fascination of people in the theme of death can be traced to events that have caused significant deaths such as wars and plagues. It can also be rooted to the acceptance and resistance of people that death is inevitable. It is perhaps a coping mechanism for the tragedies and ill human conditions people experience. Death has been a prevalent theme since the early years of art. From ancient folklore to modern death metal songs, the death theme seems not to be losing its appeal. Death inspired art may not be considered mainstream art.

Mainstream art is mostly a celebration of life. Death is a natural part of life. So there should also be a celebration of death. It is inevitable and consistently present around us. From a decaying flower, death of a distant relative, or mass death in politically unstable areas, death has left its touch everywhere we look. We are being reminded by this genre of art that we should not be pretending not to see death in our surroundings. Artists who

work with the theme of death should not be accused of being sacrilegious. They are not less sane than us.

They were merely inspired by what they see in their surroundings. They just happen to witness death and appreciated its beauty. If we analyze art works that are celebrating the beauty of life, we could see how extreme are its difference with art with death as its theme. Let us take for example a song about how beautiful life is, and compare with a song talking its listeners that death is only the solution to the ill human condition. We can see that the obvious difference is worldview. The artist of the optimistic song could have been treated well by life.

On the other hand the artist of the death inspired song could have been exposed to the reality of death in the society. This is what makes death inspired art interesting, its scope. Art with death themes obviously talks about death, but at the same time it makes us contemplate about life. It makes us question our situation as living beings. It is an example of human creativity exploring areas beyond what is conventional. It makes us explore more our imagination, which is always good for any form of art. The society has always been unfriendly with any art with unconventional themes like death.

The society has a tendency to categorize them as somewhat taboo, even sacrilegious. This is because people will always be afraid of death. People naturally fear what they don't know and people find it hard to accept their fear. They will just cut all connections they have with their fear. What people don't realize is that there is a beneficial purpose of these arts. That is to popularize the death theme so that we can get used to seeing death's

influence in our lives. The recognition of death's inevitability makes us get more out of life.

Death is an irreversible process, but in a way, so is life. In reality, death is inevitable. Death is also inevitable in the arts. History has proven that death is a prevalent theme ever since. Some people tried to repress its popularity and failed. Death is just a part of what we see everyday. And what we see everyday is what inspires artists to express themselves. After all, if art is the imitation of life, art also can be an imitation of death. Death inspired art just shows us the limitless potential of human creativity, as it can explore even the unknown regions death.