

Death in 'sonnet on  
the death of mr.  
richard west' and 'ode  
on the death of a  
fav...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Thomas Gray and Thomas Hardy both explore the treatment of loss in their poems 'Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West', 'Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Goldfishes', and 'The Voice'. Each of these works provide a contrasting presentation of the concept of loss, which underlines the fact that as humans we react to grief differently. Whilst Gray's 'Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat' is a satirical poem, mocking the death of his friend Horace Walpole's cat Selima, his 'Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West' has a far more sombre, sincere tone. Similarly, Hardy's 'The Voice' reflects his own pain following the death of his wife Emma in 1912, as he reveals his desperate longing to hear her voice once again. However this poem remains focused on the notion of denial, whereas Gray's sonnet is more bitter, conveying a sense of futility with regards to the loss of friend since preparatory school, who died at age twenty-six. Despite the varied approaches to the theme of loss, it is to be noted that the texts have certain elements in common, such as the use of natural imagery, but also the elevated language in each of Gray's works which serves to produce either a humorous or a formal effect.

The unconventional presentation of loss in Thomas Gray's 'Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat' almost mimics human sentimentality, as the exaggerated and grandiose language is more amusing than sorrowful. Despite its refined appearance, as the poem develops the reader discovers that the aggrandized expressions simply mark the lack of sympathy for the loss of Walpole's cat. Gray's disinterest is evident in the first manuscript of the poem, a letter to Walpole, where Gray asks "Selima was it? or Fatima?" when writing his condolences. Gray goes on to say "you will excuse me if I

do not begin to cry", which further demonstrates his lack of compassion on the sensitive matter. The language of the poem is lofty, and far more extravagant than necessary when describing such an inane occurrence. As a result, Gray cleverly produces a clear contrast between the style of language utilized and the event being described; implying that the poem is merely mocking the cat's death. Gray likens the cat's plight to the tragic fall of an epic hero, constructing a majestic, almost mythical image of Selima, the 'hapless nymph' (l. 19). This metaphor is humorous due to its obscurity; the use of the word 'nymph' is so out of context to the domestic incident that the reader is forced to imagine the event in a more dignified light. However, the sheer contrast between the image of the cat desperately drowning and that of a divine spirit only serves to provide amusement. Likewise, the incorporation of religious language produces a comical effect due to its incongruousness in relation to the occurrence. For example, the cat is described as 'emerging from the flood' (l. 31) - this carries religious connotations of the Genesis Flood and adds to the poem's sense of sophistication, yet at the same time this builds on the insincere tone as it is somewhat laughable that the image of a cat in a fishbowl is by any means comparable to The Great Flood. Gray's use of religious language is also embedded in the third stanza:

Still had she gazed; but 'midst the tide Two angel forms were seen to glide,  
The genii of the stream; (ll. 13-15)

To an extent, the elegant language presents the death of the cat as beautiful, as the metaphorical description of the fish as 'angel forms' makes the event seem rather peaceful and dreamy. Furthermore, the choice of the <https://assignbuster.com/death-in-sonnet-on-the-death-of-mr-richard-west-and-ode-on-the-death-of-a-favourite-cat/>

word 'genii' refers to guardian spirits - this suggests that the fish are holy, therefore implying that the cat's death is the natural work of God. This description of the celestial nature of the fish is somewhat reassuring - the reader is led to believe that the loss of Selima is tranquil rather than erratic. Nevertheless, it's likely that Gray's intentions are not to present Selima's end as peaceful, but rather to continue building up comedic effect, as the bizarre link between the cat and God contributes to the overall insincerity.

Despite the fact that the title of the poem refers to the piece as an ode, it is rather a parody of the ode form - again hinting at the lack of seriousness. Regardless of this, the poem is, in some ways, characteristic of an Horatian ode, due to the gentle use of humour and the reflective style. The text also possesses a sense of detachment when discussing the loss of Selima, whilst maintaining an elegant and dignified tone; an aspect often present in Horatian odes. The stanzaic rhyme scheme builds on this sense of uniformity, however, at the same time this contributes to the satirical feel - the regular rhyme produces a light-hearted and strangely upbeat feel to the poem. This mock-heroic style is unusual, and differs to the majority of Gray's other poems which are often more gloomy - such as his 'Hymn to Adversity' which has a deeply melancholic mood. On the other hand, it is evident that the treatment of loss in 'Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat' is insincere, as Gray denotes the over-sentimentality of man by transforming a standard event into an exaggerated account.

Gray's poem, 'Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West' adopts a similar level of elevated language, however, the tone of the poem appears far more genuine and sombre than the ode. The poem is spoken through the voice of <https://assignbuster.com/death-in-sonnet-on-the-death-of-mr-richard-west-and-ode-on-the-death-of-a-favourite-cat/>

Gray himself, as he reveals his sorrows on the death of his dearest friend. Gray's translation of his lament acts as a cathartic release, as the reader can consider how Gray himself is pained by grief – something which is not addressed in the previous poem. The opening of the poem instantly informs the reader of the speaker's aggrieved attitude:

In vain to me the smiling mornings shine, And reddening Phœbus lifts his golden fire; The birds in vain their amorous descant join; Or cheerful fields resume their green attire; These ears, alas! for other notes repine, (ll. 1-5)

The abrupt nature of the phrase 'in vain' marks Gray's anger at the injustice of Mr. West's death – this phrase is repeated on another two occasions in the poem, stressing the futility of his loss. This bitter attitude is further demonstrated by the sibilance of 'smiling mornings shine', as the harsh, piercing sound produced hints at the distress of Gray. The constant use of alliteration throughout the poem builds on the speaker's resentment, as the poet's choice of jarring sounds means the text carries a sense of annoyance throughout. For example, the alliteration in 'Phœbus lifts his golden fire' creates a forceful and somewhat explosive tone. The sonnet is also embedded with sibilance, producing an almost continuous sense of joltiness – again reflecting Gray's agony. For example, the use of the words 'birds', 'amorous', 'descant', 'fields', 'resume', 'ears', 'alas' and 'notes' in the lines above produces a semi-constant hiss. This builds an eerie, solemn mood, yet similarly, it conveys a sense of slight aggression in the speaker's voice – meaning that when read aloud, the reader is able to notice his frustration. The pain of loss is also intensified by the use of ecphesis, as the exclamation 'these ears, alas!' hints at Gray's inability to maintain total

<https://assignbuster.com/death-in-sonnet-on-the-death-of-mr-richard-west-and-ode-on-the-death-of-a-favourite-cat/>

composure. This outburst indicates how loss can lead to erratic, uncontrolled behavior. The repeated use of personal pronouns also reveals how the grief has deeply affected Gray himself, as the speaker refers to ' me, my, mine, I', and there is no mention of ' him' [Mr. West] until line thirteen. This may be indicative of the fact that loss can make some people selfish - perhaps Gray is demonstrating how death can lead one to become absorbed in self-pity rather than viewing matters from a wider, more sensible perspective. Nevertheless, at the same time the speaker's focus on himself allows the poem to become an act of self-exploration; a therapeutic manner of coping with the effects of loss.

The significance of the death of Mr. West is also demonstrated by the use of natural imagery, as Gray implies that the courses of nature have now been tainted. This links to Gray's ' Ode on the Spring', written in 1742, which displaces Spring's association with restoration, and replaces it with that of death. This sombre stance is likely influenced by the fact that Gray's life himself was plagued by hardship - as he reveals in a letter to West, declaring himself a frequent victim of ' a white Melancholy, or rather Leucocholy'. Gray's pessimistic attitude is captured in the opening of the sonnet as he discusses how the sun and the birds have no real purpose - merely referring to their actions as ' in vain'. The dramatic description of nature being futile is to a certain degree, similar to the style of ' Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat', as the hyperbolized notion of the natural world being pointless is somewhat ridiculous - like the strangely elevated and spiritual description of the cat's death.

The use of the Italian sonnet form also demonstrates the importance of Mr. West's death, as it's traditionally used for love poems. Perhaps the choice of a sonnet is Gray's attempt to express his affection and love for his friend, however, similarly, it could be another example of a poem mocking the conventions - like the 'Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat'. On the other hand, the use of iambic pentameter means that the poem possesses a heightened sense of formality, as the regular rhythm produces a sense of control. This indicates the sincerity of Gray in this poem - the smart structural layout allows the speaker to express his lament clearly and appropriately. The use of alternative rhyme means the text maintains an ordered structure, perhaps indicating how Gray is trying to make sense of matters following the shock of his dear friend's death. Nevertheless, the rhyme carries a lot of repetition of the vowel 'i', for example in the words 'shine', 'fire', 'attire', 'repine', 'require' - again producing a somewhat whiny undertone. In addition, the sonnet has a similar internal rhyme: 'smiling...shine' (l. 1), 'cheerful fields' (l. 4), 'lonely...no' (l. 7). This only heightens the melancholic undertones of the poem, and builds on the idea that loss causes great agony for those left behind.

Thomas Hardy's 'The Voice' is similar to Gray's sonnet in the sense that the use of natural imagery is incorporated in order to express the concept of loss. Despite this, the poem's approach to the theme is slightly different, as the speaker remains dominated by their overwhelming feelings of denial. In this case, the speaker is Hardy himself, as he is reflecting on the death of his wife Emma, in 1912. Hardy's longing to hear her voice is captured in the opening stanza of the poem:

<https://assignbuster.com/death-in-sonnet-on-the-death-of-mr-richard-west-and-ode-on-the-death-of-a-favourite-cat/>

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me, Saying that now you  
are not as you wereWhen you had changed from the one who was all to me,  
But as at first, when our day was fair. (ll. 1-4)

The repetition of ' call to me' in the first line instantly highlights the speakers' desperation to communicate with his dead wife once again, as Hardy creates a dazed, chant-like feel - this suggests that perhaps the speaker is not fully accepting of his loss. The use of triple rhymes also adds to this sense of bewilderment - ' call to me', ' all to me', ' view you then' (l. 5), ' knew you then' (l. 7). This allows the reader to consider the effects of loss with regards to one's rationality; it would appear as if the speaker is unable to view matters coherently. The overuse of rhyme in the poem makes the work sound somewhat artificial, and for this reason it is unclear as to whether the voice can truly be heard, or if it is simply imagined. The speaker's lack of control would suggest that the voice is imagined, as upon reading the poem, one can see the obscurity of their thoughts. Likewise, this adds to the presentation of denial, as the overdeveloped rhyme links to the speaker's unhealthy dwelling on the voice. Hardy's choice to use dactylic tetrameter further contributes to the disorientated feel of the poem, as the uncommon meter has a dizzying effect - implying that the speaker is not compos mentis. In the last two stanzas of the poem Hardy use of sibilance and alliteration continues to build on the confused attitude of the speaker, as this makes the poem rather dense:

Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessnessTravelling across the wet mead to  
me here, You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness, (ll. 9-11)



Here the sibilance is onomatopoeic of the wind; therefore indicating how the speaker is desperately struggling to hold onto his wife's voice. The use of natural imagery is similar to that of Gray's sonnet, yet here the loss of the wife seems to have given nature a greater purpose - as the wind is said to carry her voice, whereas in Gray's poem Mr. West's death is said to have made nature futile. The last stanza of the poem disrupts the rhythmic scheme meaning all focus is drawn to the state of the speaker, who is 'faltering forward' (l. 13) with leaves 'falling' (l. 14) around him. The alliteration here is quite sharp, producing a slightly jarring effect. Likewise, the caesura and end stopping in this last stanza creates a faltering rhythm; implying that life is forcing him onward, yet his renewed feelings for his dead wife mean that he keeps stumbling. This lamentable tone is characteristic to Hardy's lyrical poetry which is often distinguished by its pervasive fatalism.

When considering the treatment of loss in the above poems, it is evident that the concept can be explored from a variety of angles. Whilst both of Gray's poems are significantly different in terms of sincerity, it is to be noted that they are from notably different contexts. For example, Gray's comedic approach towards the loss of Walpole's cat contrasts greatly with his sonnet for his dearest friend - perhaps due to the personal involvement behind the poem. Similarly, the serious tone of Hardy's poem for his wife is likely due to the fact that he is discussing a loss that is extremely important on his behalf. Consequently, it is clear that the portrayal of death in poetry is determined by the circumstances under which the text is created - with regards to the above poems, the author's emotions of bitterness, frustration, despair and

denial are all reflective of the importance of their loss experienced in their own life.