

# Close reading of 'ode to death': smith's paradox of acceptance



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Charlotte Smith's late poem 'Ode to Death', published in 1797 in her collection of Elegiac Sonnets, draws on the idea of accepting death as a 'friend' (l. 1) rather than fearing it. The ode carries a deep sense of desperation and sorrow, as it alludes to the grief endured by Smith in her own lifetime; predominantly referring to the passing of her daughter, Anna Augusta de Foville. This marks Smith's capacity to manipulate her sorrow as a poetic construct, as the speaker acts as a substitute for her own identity. By dwelling on the 'torturing pain' (l. 7) of life, the poet succeeds in presenting mortality as somewhat desirable - personifying it as 'Misery's Cure' (l. 21). This allows the reader to reflect on its ability to provide relief to those in suffering.

The speaker's willingness to embrace death is evident in the opening line of the poem, as the stress on the word 'friend' (l. 1) elicits attention to itself. Despite the ode's general use of iambic pentameter, here emphasis is placed on the first syllable of the line - meaning the image of death as a companion is more prominent. The abrupt nature of the exclamation 'Friend of the wretched!' (l. 1) is also significant, as it hints at the despair of the speaker, who appears to be eagerly awaiting death. The caesura in lines 1-3 of the first stanza adds to this sense of urgency, as it produces a jolty rhythm. This weight of exigency is demonstrated throughout the poem, as Smith's use of ecphrasis reinforces the speaker's restlessness and inability to withhold their sudden outbursts of emotion: 'Ah!' (l. 3), 'O Death!' (l. 19), 'Oh!' (l. 21). Similarly, Smith incorporates a series of rhetorical questions in order to create a fast-paced verse - this is particularly noticeable in the third stanza,

where the simultaneous use of three questions reveals the impatience of the speaker:

Sharp goading Indigence who would not fly, That urges toil the exhausted strength above? Or shun to the once fond friend's averted eye? Or who to thy asylum not remove, To lose the wasting pain of unrequited love? (ll. 11-15)

A feeling of bewilderment is created, as the constant interrogations reflect the turbulence of the narrator's distressed mind. The use of anaphora in lines 13-14 also intensifies the uneasy mood, meaning the speaker's agitation grows more apparent, again producing a sense of haste.

Whilst to an extent the speaker's behaviour appears slightly chaotic, at the same time Smith conveys a sense of measured logic behind their thoughts, as the continual focus on life's miseries facilitates the justification of death. The poem therefore suggests that it is wiser to die rather than force oneself to endure constant hardship:

[...] -Ah! Wherefore fears to dieHe, who compelled each poignant grief to know, Drains to its lowest dregs the cup of woe? (ll. 3-5)

The rhetorical question allows Smith to rationalize death, as the speaker presents it as an escape from 'each poignant grief'. The regularity of the quintain rhyme scheme throughout the poem also maintains a sense of uniformity. In this regard the poem takes the form of a typical Horatian ode; the tone remains balanced and poised as the speaker evaluates the arguments in favour of accepting death. The rhyming couplets at the end of

each stanza also build on this sense of stability, as the form remains consistent and neat. The overall effect is comparable to that of the Petrarchan sonnet; where the internal couplets create the effect of rounded thought and reflection.

The vindication of death as an ally is further demonstrated through Smith's hyperbolised description of life's afflictions:

Fear thee, O Death!- Or hug the chains that bind  
To joyless, cheerless life, her  
sick, reluctant mind? (ll. 19-20)

The jarring effect produced by the dissonance in line 20 is reflective of the speaker's attitude of disgust towards life, as the repetition of the harsh 'c' creates a jolty, violent feel. The sibilance through the repetition of 'less' adds to the aggressive tone due to the sharpness of the sound; hinting at the speaker's frustration. Smith's use of imagery also builds on the idea of death as a form of relief, as the narrator's metaphorical image of life as 'chains' implies that death grants liberation from a miserable, restricted existence. However, the tone in these lines differs from that at the beginning of the stanza, where Smith refers to the death of her daughter Anna, who died during childbirth in 1795. The use of apostrophe leads the voice to become much softer, contrasting with the generally bitter and harsh tone of the poem:

Can then the wounded wretch who must deplore  
What most she loved, to thy  
cold arms consigned, Who hears the voice that soothed her soul no more, (ll. 16-18)

The smooth sibilance throughout these lines creates a more subdued mood, leading to a slight lull in the verse. This means a more melancholic feel is produced, as Smith uses the voice of the speaker to reflect on her own family misfortune; as well as the loss of Anna, she had also witnessed the deaths of three of her twelve children during childhood. The sonnet therefore calls into question the preeminence of motherhood, and according to Jacqueline Labbe, allows Smith to explore the 'ramifications of maternal grief'. Smith continues to present death as desirable by contrasting the distress of life with the supposedly peaceful act of dying:

Would Cowardice postpone thy calm embrace,  
To linger out long years in  
torturing pain? (ll. 6-7)

The use of the word 'Cowardice' here has a rather forceful effect, as the stress of the meter falls on the first syllable; producing an explosive sound. This creates a harsh, almost accusatory tone; the speaker appears frustrated by the feebleness of those who refuse to openly accept death. The sharpness of this word juxtaposed with the softness of the phrase 'calm embrace' emphasises the welcoming nature of death; as the repetition of 'm' and 'c' constructs a soothing sound; conveying an image of hugging Death itself. It is also to be noted that Smith exaggerates life's sorrows through the use of alliteration in line 7, as the repetition of 'l' in 'linger' and 'long' draws out the vowels to create a slower pace, hinting at the prolonged pain of life.

The idea of incessant misery is reinforced through the sonnet's internal rhyme - for example in 'linger' and 'years', and 'long' and 'torturing' (l. 7). Here the repetition of the vowel sounds 'i' and 'o' drags out the length of

the line, causing the reader to slow down, hence reflecting this idea of perpetual suffering. This is noticeable throughout the poem; 'lowest [...]' (l. 5), 'who too' (l. 9), 'aid [...] vain' (l. 10), 'once fond' (l. 13), 'wasting pain' (l. 15), 'wounded [...] who' (l. 14), 'thy [...] consigned' (l. 17), 'life [...] mind' (l. 20), 'angel [...] save' (l. 22). The assonance created as a result contributes to the poem's overall sound of despair, as the repeated emphasis on vowels produces whiney, eerie undertones and continues to draw on the idea of endless grief. Smith's manipulation of meter is also significant in terms of reflecting pain. Despite the most part of the poem being in iambic pentameter, the last lines of stanzas 2 - 5 are in iambic hexameter. Here the additional two syllables are accentuated, as the altered cadence draws attention to the last word of each stanza. Likewise, this is indicative of the prolonged agony of life, suggesting that death is the solution to the unnecessarily long torture. This fixation on suffering is again influenced by the severe grief endured by Smith herself, as before facing the deaths of four children, at a young age her own mother passed away - meaning she was raised by her aunt from 1753. Loraine Fletcher argues that Smith's works 'increasingly focus on the middle-aged rather than the young', therefore the voice in 'Ode to Death' resembles one such as herself; meaning 'the reader who is aware of her age and personal history identifies the author with the character'.

The poem's portrayal of death as a remedy to life's sorrows is reflective of the author's personal experiences with regards to grief, as the verse discusses the 'ills that chase' man (l. 8) and a life plagued with misery. However, it is interesting to note that the third person narrator is somewhat

ambiguous - in the opening stanza the 'wretched' figure is referred to as a male; 'He', but then in lines 16-20 the character moves to 'she', before becoming a gender neutral 'they' in lines 21-23. The peculiar inconsistency of the speaker allows Smith to disguise herself, yet still achieve a sort of 'self-revelation' by adapting the voice to fit her own ordeals. 'Ode to Death' displays a romanticisation of mortality and pessimistic attitude towards life that has consequently led editors to see just one narrator in the poem, and that is the poet herself.