

The immortality of a dead cat



Her beauty defied comparison. Her joy in life's simplest pleasures endeared her to all who knew her. Her insatiable curiosity drove her to constantly explore, examine, and engage in the world around her. All these qualities make her loss seem all the more tragic. She left a void that could never be filled, that is, until someone buys a new family cat. Through his subtle use of several literary devices, Thomas Gray creates a humorous mock eulogy in his "Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes." Superficially, Gray employs the praise and lament indicative of traditional, somber eulogies. Yet with his playful verse form, exotic and regal metaphors, and mythical allusions, he unveils a less serious perspective on mortality. Through this unconventional look at death, Gray argues that life has its difficulties, trials and tribulations, but he also holds that life's little subtleties can be amusing. Through this meticulously crafted and humorous account of Selima's loss, the poet comforts his friend in his time of grief. The cat may have died. It may have been both sad and disturbing at the time. Gray, however, emphasizes that the sadness should not completely overshadow the humor in a cat that drowns in a goldfish pond. While the poet paints a humorous image of death with his language, the very structure of the piece lends itself to that tone. The most basic, prevalent and consistent aspect of this poem that makes it a mock rather than somber eulogy is its verse form. Although it may seem a mechanical and detached literary device, verse form, like a human heart beat, gives this poem its life force. Primarily written in iambic feet, the lines resemble natural human speech: not excessively emotional or emphatic but, rather, consistent. Had Gray been particularly distraught by the cruel twist of fate, perhaps he would have incorporated an occasional spondee or caesura to emphasize the tragedy. As it stands,

however, the poem retains a matter-of-fact intonation. Furthermore, the line lengths are brief, with two lines of tetrameter followed by a line of trimeter, and are therefore reminiscent of a ballad stanza. Rather than painstakingly dote on the fond remembrance of a beloved cat, these lines dance along in a buoyant manner. Similarly, the rhyme scheme of “ aabccb” throughout all six stanzas favors a musical and lively reading. Given that the subject matter of this poem revolves about the loss of life in a violent manner, the verse form dramatically undermines the topic thereby allowing a sense of humor to accompany the sorrow. Foreign lands, precious stones, and vivid imagery collide in the metaphors that describe a simple, ordinary house cat. Through these images and comparisons, Selima rises from a mere domestic pet to a praiseworthy and majestic goddess, especially in the eyes of her human family. With her “ snowy beard,” the “ velvet of her paws,” jet black ears, and “ emerald eyes,” she becomes an untouchable paragon of perfection (lines 8, 9, 10, 11). Had Gray simply described these features in dull terms, such as “ white,” “ soft,” “ black” or “ green,” his description would fail to fully capture her beauty and majesty and thereby serve a grave injustice to her memory. Having illustrated her handsome exterior, the poet then proceeds to depict the vanity and greed of “ the presumptuous maid” through both her self-doting and her “ ardent wish...to reach the prize” of the goldfish (25, 21, 22). A lady of leisure and wealth, Selima is wont to getting attention and possessing all that she desires. Through these metaphors and images, Gray illustrates a spoiled and self-absorbed princess, thus rendering her ultimate death all the more amusing. His closing metaphor applies not only to the “ golden gleam” of the goldfish, but likewise to Selima: she too “ glisters,” but is not “ gold” (18, 42). The rich

and exotic description of the cat and her desires lends itself to the humorous tone of this poem. Beyond describing the features and qualities of this unfortunate cat, the literary allusions Gray employs evokes mythical and epic images. The goldfish, as “genii of the stream,” are thus connected with Roman spirits, while their scaly Tyrian-hued armor suggests an ancient luxurious purple dye (15, “genii,” 16). Armed for the epic battle, the fish prepare as Selima, the narcissistic and “hapless nymph,” falls victim to the cruelty and interference of “Fate” (19, 28). Nymphs and the three Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, appear frequently in both Roman and Greek mythology: the nymphs typically serve as stock characters whereas the Fates have control over (human) destiny (“nymph,” “fates”). Gray’s subtle use of these characters acts to artificially inflate the plight of a mere cat. Neither Arion’s dolphin nor a “Nereid” comes to her rescue despite her entreaties to “every watery god” (34, 34, 32). The juxtaposition of a cat with the epic heroes, like Achilles and Odysseus, further mocks the “tragedy” of her death. These heroes challenged the gods, powerful beasts, the vicious elements, and their own wills whereas Selima merely died because she fell in a tub of water. Through literary allusion, Gray ridicules the significance of Selima’s death by describing it in epic and mythological terms. Although the loss of a loved one may be traumatic and seem senseless, Gray argues that people must keep perspective, especially when that loved one is just a cat. Through the verse form, from the meter to the number of feet to the rhyme scheme, Gray maintains a lively beat to a poem concerning death. This element alone sets the tone of the poem. The metaphors and imagery illustrate a mere house cat as an exotic, spoiled goddess. Gray furthers this image with literary allusions, hearkening to Greek and Roman mythology.

Through these comparisons and allusions, the poet juxtaposes a cat with queens, heroes, and goddesses. Rather than give her death greater importance, he ridicules her folly and the tragedy of her demise. The humor conveyed by these literary devices make the poem a mock eulogy, both amusing to its readers and compassionate to her family. The wit of the mock eulogy makes Selima more than just a dead cat: in her death, she has become immortal. Works Cited” fates, n”, “ genii, n”, “ nymph, n”. The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 4 Apr. 2000. Gray, Thomas. “ Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes.” The Longman Anthology of British Literature. Ed. David Damrosch. 2nd ed. Vol. 1C. New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, 2003. 4 vols. 2714-2715.