

On death

Business



Death, in its physical form and its complexly layered psychological form, has been one of the most fascinating subjects for the human mind to contemplate. The crux of humanity, death is not only the reason of our mortality but also a representation of the fleeting nature of life on earth and the inscrutability of the afterlife.

Along with scientists and doctors, philosophers, poets, and men and women of literature, have been enamored with the idea of the end, how it effects the present, and what may or may not reside beyond it. Writers throughout the centuries have tried to define the essence of death and how it affects life. There has been no definitive answer except that of the individuality of how to approach it. Each human being views death differently and these following pieces show just how distinct the opinions or thoughts on death can be, even by those renowned among the world of literature. John Donne (1572-1631), was an English metaphysical poet who wrote sonnets on the nature of death, which have most certainly influenced countless writers since.

His sonnet, "Death Be Not Proud" was probably written in 1610, but it wasn't published until after his death, in 1633. The poem addresses death and Donne beautifully interlaces this address with images and ideas of what he believed death meant. "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so..." (Donne 943), the poem begins by telling Death that he should not be proud, for he is a thing that should not be feared.

He believes Death is neither mighty nor dreadful, and "For those who thou think'st thou dost overthrow die not..." (Donne 943). He writes that Death

cannot even kill himself, the speaker. By personifying death, and making him into the character Death, Donne lowers the unattainable limitless of the word death into one character, who it seems, is not so immense at all.

The second part of the poem shifts, changing from a criticizing view of Death to one of praise. Death, Donne says, is but a form of sleep, in which the good men of Earth may go to “ Rest of their bones, and soul’s delivery” (Donne 943). Death has changed from a character of no real force to one of a carrier of souls to their resting place, for Death itself is the release of all of mortal man’s sufferings. Following this praise, Donne once again criticizes Death, saying “ Thou ‘ rt slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men..

.” (Donne 943). Death is not a king, instead he is the slave of kings and even of fate. Death dwells with the terrible pieces of the world (“ poison, war, and sickness..

.”) and even then he is no grand leader, for “ poppy, and “ charms” can make humans sleep as well, therefore Death is not even needed. In the final lines of this sonnet, Donne drives home his clear point, that Death is not only subject to mere mortals and that it is not the only place of rest, but that it is in fact destined to die as well: “ And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.” (Donne 943). John Donne writes a poem that utterly strips death of its entrapments, those of grandeur, terror, and mystery.

He believes death holds nothing above mans head and that, although the nature of death is the souls everlasting sleep, this eternal resting place may be found by other means. In 1800, the romantic poet William Blake (1757-1827), wrote a letter to William Hayley on his sadness that he felt for Hayley, <https://assignbuster.com/on-death/>

who had lost someone close to him. He paralleled Hayley's loss with humans sufferings, how humans live life in a " valley of misery and happiness mixed...

" (Blake 705). He continues to tell his friend that their deceased friends "... are more really with us than when they were apparent to our mortal part." (Blake 705).

Blake writes of the death of his brother thirteen years before, and how, even to that day, he converses with his spirit and how he continues to see him in his imagination. Blake believes that in death humans are still connected to Earth through the imaginations of those who, in their mortal lives, are able to call back the deads spirit through their remembrance of them. These spirits to Blake are more " real" than even their mortal counterpart, meaning that in Blake's mind the spirits of the dead are the truest version of those who lived. In death, ones spirit is the essence of that human being, and this essence is generated by the memories and imaginations of those left on Earth. Blake writes that even in that instant he hears his brother's advice and writes from his " dictate", asking the forgiveness of Hayley for expressing his enthusiasm which he wishes " all to partake in". His enthusiasm comes from the fact that he hopes Hayley will be convinced and persuaded ".

.. that every mortal loss is an Immortal Gain. The Ruins of Time builds Mansions in Eternity...

" (Blake 705). It is in those last words on death and the afterlife that his true beliefs are revealed. Blake, unlike Donne, believes that Death is in a way <https://assignbuster.com/on-death/>

another form of life, death brings the afterlife, a world of spirits and the true essences of mortals. Instead of the resting place that Donne envisions, Blake's afterlife brings about images of another world, a world of immortality. While a loss on Earth brings sadness it also produces an immortal gain as another spirit is welcomed into life after death. "The Ruins of Time builds Mansions in Eternity" is the most powerful phrase in this letter, and it relays to much of the feeling surrounding death and the romantic poets.

During William Blake's life and the following romantic poets, death was scrutinized, played with, and pummelled by the eager minds of these poets. Some followed the thoughts of Donne, imagining afterlife as a place of peace but no real matter and viewed death as just another step in life, nothing to be frightened of, while others, like John Keats, were twisted up inside by the idea of death and how leaving the world and its mortal beauty would be. Blake on the other hand truly believed that time, and the way humans live and stumble through the ruins of passing minutes and years are just aspects of the imagination and so is the idea of death. As humans die and leave their warped mortal life of time, they add to the afterlife, creating another brick in the masterful building of a place like no other. Percy Shelley (1792-1822), a later romantic poet, wrote on this subject in "On Death" as well, which adds another layer to the dimensions of the ideas surrounding this seeming mystery.

Unlike Donne or Blake, Shelley actually gives light to man's mortal life. Life, to Shelley, is like a "meteor beam", and just as flickering and fleeting, for the "dawning of morn's undoubted light" is bound to come. The poem continues on and Shelley masterfully uses the amazing images of the "
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stormy shades” of the world and the “ billows of clouds” to urge man to live life to its fullest, because although there is sadness that comes with something that will end so soon, the swiftness of life is purely what makes it so great. Instead of seeing death as less than it is believed to be, as Donne does, Shelley reassures the idea in the fear of death, because Earth, like a “ mother” or “ nurse” is something that comforts the lives of humans, and leaving that comfort can be frightening. Shelley says this fear stems from the fact that all humans know, everything that we truly feel, will be gone in the face of death, and the unknown is intimidating. Like some of his fellow romantic poets, Percy believed that pain and pleasure come in a pair, as does life and death.

The sweetness and fragility of life lived as a mortal, always on the brink of death, is what truly makes it worthwhile. The poem ends in questioning who could ever know what is to come beyond the reach of mortality, reaffirming his urge to humans to continue on in life, for life’s relationship with its demise is that which enables it to be so great. Each of these pieces display particular views from different time periods on the nature of life, death, and the afterlife. Instead of coming to a concrete conclusion, comparing and contrasting these opinions simply reaffirm the expected. That all ideas, theories, and even sciences on the nature of death, the death beyond that of the body, are the musings of man, and the truth is unknown.

Countless religions and cultures all ponder the seemingly tireless question of death, but it is for each individual to decide their own understanding of it. And even then humans will not know the truth, for as the previous authors

wrote, death, and whatever may come after it, is a mystery, only to be unraveled by those who have left our Earth and mortality.