

PERCEPTION OF DEATH IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POETRY

Yuliia TORHOVETS

Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University, Ukraine

E-mail: y.torhovets@kubg.edu.ua

ABSTRACT: This research is a determined attempt to reveal the perception of DEATH in contemporary English poetry. It has been a focal point of lengthy discussions and numerous reflections, as DEATH is a universal experience that everybody regardless of nationality, gender and marital status, religious and political views will go through one day. All people are mortal by nature, but the idea of what happens after death to some extent depends on the culture or religion they belong to. Thus, the religious perception of DEATH as a stage of transformation that puts an end to earthly suffering and paves the way for an everlasting, abundant life in Heaven can be traced in modern English poetry. It helps people embrace their own mortality, make peace with the fluidity of time and inevitability of DEATH. Another finding shows that DEATH is often depicted as the end of the journey, the awareness of which, on the one hand, fills life with meaning and motivates people to act on their dreams, but on the other, causes deep regrets about missed opportunities and wasted time. There is no distinct fear of DEATH in the studied poetry, but rather the feeling of immense sadness over something the person hasn't done or can't change.

KEYWORDS: poetry, death, life, inevitability, mortality, regret, metaphor

Introduction

Four or three years ago, I watched Steve Jobs's 2005 Stanford commencement speech. The whole address was brilliant and memorable, but one particular thing resonated with me, the part that went: "No one wants to die, even people who want to get to heaven, don't want to die to get there, and yet death is the destination we all share"(Stanford, 2008). Those were well-chosen, strong words full of absolute truth and deep meaning. They got me thinking about the value and sense of life because at that time I thought very little about death. Obviously, I focused on life and paid no attention to death as I was in my thirties, fit and relatively healthy, so in Jobs's words "death was useful but purely intellectual concept" to me. However, everything changed on February 24th, 2022, when I woke up early in the morning to the sounds of explosions outside my window and the constant ringing of my mobile phone. Since that heart-stopping moment one "purely intellectual" concept has become a part of my daily life, something that a little earlier had been in the distant future suddenly started looming on the horizon. From that day on, I got interested in death. The purpose of this long introduction is to shed light on how the idea of the study came into being, and why it is focused on this dreadful but nonetheless fundamental concept. This article seeks to identify the perspectives on DEATH in contemporary English poetry.

Death: cultural and religious perspectives

The first step to understanding death in contemporary English poetry lies in the study of its definition and perception in different cultures and religions. On a simple biological level, death is defined as "the end of life" (Cambridge Online), "a permanent cessation of all vital functions" (Merriam-Webster Online). However, death is not merely a biological process. There is more to it than meets the eye. Death is ultimately a deeply personal human experience that evokes different reactions, emotions, and perceptions from individuals, families, and communities throughout the life cycle (Institute of Medicine, 2015, p.11). Since the dawn of time, people have been interested in death and what happens to them when they die. The idea that one day we will cease to exist is truly insufferable, but "why does the apprehension of death so trouble us?" (Allison, 2016). Dale C. Allison Jr. (2016) states that it is our "genetic programming": "Our recoil is a biological reflex, bestowed by an evolutionary process that instills the instinct to survive. In this we're like all the other animals. Even the spider is afraid of death, or at least is designed to flee it [...]. The spider's genetically encrypted behavior, its frantic impulse to escape death, is also encoded in us. Here there are no lines between species. When an untimely end approaches, all healthy members of the animal kingdom scurry in the opposite direction" (Allison, 2016).

The fear of death is universal, "humans, however, have evolved advanced and complex cognitive abilities that enable them to not only be self-aware, but also to anticipate future outcomes. These sophisticated cognitive abilities make possible the awareness of the inevitability of death – and that it can occur at any time. Thus, the friction between the desire for self-preservation and the awareness that death is inevitable and unpredictable can induce feelings of anxiety and terror whenever

situations arise that remind them of their mortality” (Gire, 2014, p. 6). Unlike animals we are afraid not only of physical death but also social. It means that “what saddens and terrifies a person is that the experiences and memories – the things that we learned, felt, valued, sensed, and loved – will not be remembered after we die” (Allison, Dale C., Jr., 2016).

Thoughts about death often bring about a deep sense of unease and unhappiness, and religion helps provide meaning and answers to the problems of uncertainty, powerlessness, and scarcity that death creates and instils the understanding that the life course is cyclical and not linear (Ilemona Ekore, & Lanre-Abass, 2016, p. 370). The Hindu faith, for example, is centered around reincarnation also known as rebirth or transmigration, the belief that the soul is indestructible and repeatedly takes on a physical body until moksha – liberation or release which occurs when the cycle of dying and rebirth ends (Hinduism Today, 2019). Thus, to a Hindu death is not fearsome since it frees us to pursue an even greater development and improvement (Cheng, 2017).

Similarly, death, in Islam, is nothing more than a transition. It is like a passage through which you enter another world higher and more advanced than the present one (AMAA Muslim Cemetery). The teaching goes that good, righteous people after their death enter Jannah, a peaceful place without pain, sickness or sadness, whereas those who perform bad deeds in their life enter Jahannam, the place where the person endures physical and spiritual suffering (Ayoub, 2021).

The Pre-Islamic Egyptian beliefs and practices concerning death are also of particular significance. The ancient Egyptians’ attitude towards death was influenced by their belief in immortality. They regarded death as a temporary interruption, rather than the cessation of life (Canadian Museum of History). Death in ancient Egypt was defined as a passage to the realm of the dead, where everything inside the person’s tomb came back to life, similar to the life they had before death (Garland, 2020). In fact, scholars claim, the modern Egyptian Arabic word for death, *al mawt*, is the same as the ancient Egyptian one and it is also used for “mother”, clearly linking the death-experience with birth or, more precisely, re-birth on an eternal plane (Mark, 2017).

In Christian tradition, death is actually unnatural. In the story told about the creation of the world in “Genesis”, Adam and Eve were destined for life. It is only because they sinned by taking a forbidden apple that they had to face death. Thus, initially death appears as a punishment. (Hoyle, 2020). However, The Bible goes that Christ sacrificed himself for us to have our sins forgiven and to be released from the death penalty (United Church of God, 2011). The Christian faith teaches that after death, individuals will be taken into the presence of God and they will be judged for the deeds they have done or failed to do during their lifetime (BBC, Death and the Afterlife). Those who are judged as worthy will have a place in Heaven, but those who are judged as being full of sin will go to Hell (BBC, Key Beliefs in Christianity). So, Christians die knowing that they will be judged by God and may, or may not, go to Heaven. Therefore, death became a very focused moment to think about God’s judgement (Hoyle, 2020).

In China, death is the biggest taboo topic and is commonly considered as a negative life event unless it is a good death called “Bai Xi Shi” in Chinese or “white happy event” in English that is death as a result of natural causes such as aging with a content life and no outstanding life regrets (Xu, 2007, p. 412). Bad death, on the other hand, manifests in dying unexpectedly, dying unprepared/unresolved, dying painfully, dying alone, and dying undignified (Jacobsen, 2017, p. 351). To the Chinese, death is not usually considered another phase of life (i.e. the afterlife) as many Christians believe (Xu, 2007, p. 412). Probably, that’s why death “is masked with a level of mystery and ambivalence – it is not approached with an open attitude, but with apprehension” (Lam, 2020).

Over the last century the perspective on death has greatly changed in the West where it has also become a taboo topic. In contemporary Western culture that values youth, people often avoid talking about death and “label it as something morbid” (Hanning, 2017), which is caused by “the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of happy life for it is henceforth given that life is always happy or should always seem to be so” (Aries, 1974, p. 87). Hence, the concept of “forbidden death” characterizes the Western attitude towards death and dying, making it shameful and forbidden.

In the light of the above, most world religions teach that death is not the end but a transitional stage, and this belief makes the idea of dying more acceptable and less unbearable, though it does not completely liberate us from the fear of the unknown that death poses. It is also clear that some religions promote the idea of an everlasting life in “paradise” for righteous people and “hell” for sinners. On the other hand, in China and the Western culture, the American one in particular, death is seen as morbid

and taboo. The next part of the research dwells on the perspectives on DEATH in contemporary English poetry, taken from an Internet poetry sharing site called *Hello Poetry* (<https://hellopoetry.com/>).

DEATH: a poetic perspective

DEATH as inevitability and final destination

The principal idea that runs through most poems is the inevitability of DEATH.

Death

Chasing dream and living life are the only things I can partake
Misery and misfortunes followed by heartache
Who am I to give you advise, my friend
Death is the ultimate destiny which we can't change (Guragai, 2022)

The opening lines of the poem entitled “Death” reflect the poet’s bitter mood and resentment about his life. The metaphor “chasing dream” indicates the author’s vain attempt to fulfil his innermost desires, and the understanding of this failure and impotence evokes the feeling of profound misery. The metaphor “Death is the ultimate destiny” discloses the firm idea of the inevitability of death and our inability to avoid what the future has in store for us, as we are powerless when faced with death and have absolutely no control over it. The feeling of sadness lingers since we come to understand the fluidity of time.

The idea of the inevitability of DEATH further develops in other poems.

Soon to pass

Death is inevitable and unforgiving.
Emotions just as unforgiving and unrelenting.
Regret and pain swell up,
A lump in your throat,
Swallowed to form the pit in your stomach.
Nights extend and days shorten with every passing thought.
If time had a hand, surely you'd hold it.
Pulling them back, begging-
pleading not to move forward.
Yet instead you're dragged along, Death only in the distance. (Stevenson, 2022)

The first lines set the tone for the rest of the poem. What must be said is that the poet is overwhelmed with negative emotions that the imminent DEATH brings about, which creates a gloomy atmosphere charged with depression. Amazingly enough, humans are the only creatures on earth aware of their finite existence. We are born into this ever-changing world with a complete understanding of the impermanence and fragility of our lives. This intense awareness fills our daily life with a sense of purpose and prompts us to seize every opportunity we encounter. And yet, however hard we try, there is always something we regret at the end. The metaphor “Regret and pain swell up, / A lump in your throat” highlights the growing, destructive emotions that a person experiences upon reaching old age and failing to fulfil his dreams and ambitions. As a person grows older, these emotions turn into a growing fear “the pit in your stomach”, probably the one of death itself. The poet employs the metaphor for life and death: “Nights extend and days shorten” where night stands for DEATH and day for LIFE. One more striking parallel can be drawn here. Nights grow longer in autumn and reach their peak in winter. Consequently, winter embodies old age and eventually DEATH. I may also assume that the personification of time in the line “If time had a hand, surely you'd hold it” discloses a universal view on the irreversible nature of time that a person can neither turn back nor slow down. The climax “Pulling them back, begging – pleading” reveals the depth of the poet’s despair, the intense feeling of hopelessness about the situation that lies beyond his control. The closing line reflects the perception of DEATH as a distant point, the destination that each and every of us will gradually arrive at in the future. This line also holds a clue to a deeper understanding of the poem, alluding to the assumption that death is a powerful reminder of the importance of a full life.

Falling

We are all falling,
Life is a drop towards ending,
You dear reader,
And I,
And we can no more delay or adjust the
Speed of our descent
Than flap our arms right now
And take flight towards the clouds,

And though we may aspire to the heavens
The only route out of life
Is down,
Drawn by that terrifying gravity
That draws us ever faster
As the years pass,
Accelerating steadily through childhood
Adolescence and young adulthood,

Streaking past the unknown
Mid point of our lives
But suddenly aware we have less to go
Than we can know and less to get
Than we already had,
And that as we hurtle out of middle age
Puts a scale to our brief existence,
And a reasonable sight of our end,

But these calculations are of no use,
As our muscles sag and our hair thins,
Skin wrinkled and translucent,
Eyesight dimmed,
Because we are tripped
By illness or literally in a fall
And thus we reach beginning of the final bend,
Our flailing stops

As we reach our journey's end. (Jamesb, 2022)

The principal idea of the inevitability of death is made evident in the poem “Falling”, but this time a new perspective on DEATH appears. The metaphor “Life is a drop towards ending” is indicative of the transience of human existence. Needless to say, “ending” represents DEATH that stands in stark contrast to LIFE that is not only short but also inconsequential on the scale of the universe. Yet, most importantly, the poet emphasizes our helplessness and inability to stop or influence the flow of time. At this point I'd like to suggest that the beginning of the poem draws us closer to the biblical perception of DEATH as the punishment for partaking the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. The opening lines are illustrative of the fall of humankind from heaven to earth, from eternal life in the Garden of Eden to finite earthly existence (physical mortality) full of adversities and misery. The lines “And though we may aspire to the heavens / The only route out of life / Is down” are full of anguish and agony. So I may conclude that the author pines for eternal life and tries to make peace with his own mortality. The enumeration of changes that occur in the human body as we age contributes to the mounting tension of the approaching DEATH. The conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY is disclosed at the end of the poem, and it is DEATH that marks the end of it. DEATH is the final stop, the end of our day-to-day struggle, the destination that we share as we all are equal in the face of DEATH.

Considering the above, one can draw the conclusion that in contemporary English poetry DEATH can be represented as an inevitable event, the final destination that signals the end of our life, and thus evokes strong feelings of regret, misery and doom.

DEATH as liberation from suffering

Still, however depressing the topic of death is, it does not always evoke exceptionally negative feelings.

Funeral

At the cry of a new born
You will only learn later — life is hard
No cowards are amongst humans
Still brave enough to walk this earth

I lament on my time,
A passive youth and often pointless dreams
As we all live as shadows;
Our temporary bodies tenting our souls
The sun will always set,
Life will end in that body's inevitable descent
And our beautiful awakening will be our souls
To rise again in the end

At the cry of one's death,
I shall only cry tears of joy (Jahmal, 2022)

The poem above is a clear example of the dualistic nature of the world. It brings to the fore the idea of inseparability of LIFE and DEATH. The poet strikes us with his view on life as being full of suffering and woe. The simile “we all live as shadows” is indicative of the poet’s deep-seated disappointment in life. It also gives us a sense of impotence as it seems that the writer fails to fulfil his ambitions and dreams. However, the metaphor “Our temporary bodies tenting our souls” is the piece that completes the puzzle and exposes the limitations that our mortal body imposes on our immortal soul. Presumably, the body is a prison that keeps us from realizing our full potential. The inevitability of death is disclosed in the metaphor “The sun will always set” where the sun represents life and the idea that sooner or later it will come to its logical end. Nevertheless, the lines “And our beautiful awakening will be our souls / To rise again in the end” reflect the poet’s belief that death is not the end of our existence, furthermore, it may be the most amazing part of it.

At this point, I can make two assumptions concerning the attitude to death in the poem. The first one is related to the concept of Heaven and the belief that those who live righteous lives get there. Thus, the line “To rise again in the end” may refer to the soul’s ascent to Heaven, a safe haven, a place of abiding peace and love, marking the transition to eternal life. The second interpretation of the line may deal with the concept of rebirth. I am inclined to believe that the poet alludes to the idea of reincarnation, emphasizing the non-physical nature of human beings and the line “The sun will always set” testifies to this. Significantly, the sun sets every evening only to rise again in the morning, like a human soul that is immortal and can come back to life in a new body after the biological death. Thus, the sun acquires an additional symbolic value and represents eternal life. Consequently, death is liberation from the daily hardships of life, and thus is not regarded as morbid or dreary. It’s noteworthy that the opening and closing lines frame the poem and intensify the distinction between birth and death drawing the parallels between the phenomena. Thus, the belief in the afterlife or reincarnation makes DEATH less dreadful and eerie.

Recovered Fragments: Remarkable Papyrus 89

Death once scared me,
Thanks to ancient tales by humanity.
But I know,
When I’m lowered below,
I’ll lovingly be received,
By The Almighty,
As well as his heavenly
Family. (Johnson Oyeniran, 2022)

As can be seen from the poem above, the growing fear of the unknown that DEATH instils subsides once the concept of the afterlife, present in different cultures and religions, develops. The fervent belief in the immortality of the soul and the existence after death in the parallel, spiritual realm (e.g. in heaven) dispels the fear of DEATH. As a result, the desire to meet “The Almighty”, God, and achieve eternal happiness outweighs the fear, giving both life in suffering and death true meaning. The cycle of life can’t be broken. We go “down” (die and get buried) to go “up” (reincarnate / go to heaven). DEATH is the transitional stage that makes the further development and refinement of our soul possible and we should not be afraid of it. It can be suggested, that the orientational metaphor DEATH IS DOWN can be clearly distinguished in the poems.

When I’m lowered *below*... (Johnson Oyeniran, 2022)

We are all *falling*
The only route out of life / Is *down*,
[...]
And we can no more delay or adjust the
/ Speed of our *descent*, (Jamesb, Jul 2022)

Life will end in that body's inevitable *descent*,
The sun will always *set* (Jahmal, 2022)

Oriental metaphors give a concept a special orientation and have a basis in our physical and cultural experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981, p. 14). Thus, the idea that the concept of DEATH is orientated down can be explained by the fact that when a person dies, he is buried under the ground, and literally the body goes down (The only route out of life / Is *down*; When I’m lowered *below*). Still, there is a cultural and religious side to it because death marks the end of life, the end of the cycle and is closely associated with sunset and winter, each of which symbolizes the ripe old age and as a result death. It may be concluded that on the one hand DEATH is seen as relentless and depriving, but on the other hand liberating. The same idea runs through the next poem.

I just want to be dead
I just want to be dead
To go to sleep
And never leave this bed
The hidden wounds go so deep
How can I let them close
When they are frequently reopened
Everyday something happens to re-expose
They will never be unopened
I just want to go to sleep
And never leave this bed (Matthews, 2022)

The poem puts forward the idea of the emancipating power of death that appears to be an asylum for souls shattered by earthly suffering. Significantly, the poet compares DEATH to sleep and presumably touches upon the biblical view on the issue. The Holy Bible goes “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt” (Bible Study Tools), which means that those who die are in a dream-like state, waiting for the Resurrection Day. Another perspective on the opening lines of the poem is purely biological as “sleep is a complex biological process that helps people process new information, stay healthy, and re-energize” (NICHD, 2019). Thus, I may suggest that the poet is tired of his life and the metaphor “The hidden wounds go so deep” testifies to the bitterness of his existence. The poet endures severe hardships and experiences things that stir up painful, heart-wrenching feelings, preventing him from enjoying his life. Exhausted and powerless, he strives to rest and probably hide from the outside world that arouses excruciating emotions. I assume that sleep in the poem has symbolic value and reflects the author’s burning desire to stay alone and rest for some time.

DEATH as a reminder to live a fulfilling life

The last thing that I want to touch upon is the view on DEATH as a constant reminder of the value of life.

After Youth

The warmth of a single sun ray
The graceful dance of fallen leaves
Cotton candy skies before nightfall
Someday I will miss all of these
[...]
Until my last breath escapes my chest
And my eyes close for one last time
I hope to live a life written in nostalgia
So I can say my life was truly mine (Castillo, 2022)

DEATH makes every minute of our life count and helps us find joy and happiness in simple things. It is in human nature to perform best under the pressure of tight deadlines. DEATH seems to be the catalyst that keeps us moving on despite tiredness and failures, so that at the end we can say that life was worth living as it was filled with unforgettable, enjoyable experiences.

Present Minute

O God
this living minute
is enough to thank
it's a present
not death! (Shofi, 2022)

We value life and cherish every moment of it because we know that it has a finite span. Life is closely related to the present, while death lies in the unavoidable future. Therefore, we shouldn't be imprisoned by our mind's restrictions and must strive to live in the present and be grateful for whatever life we have.

Conclusion

The analysis of the research material shows that the topic of DEATH is not a taboo in contemporary English poetry. Poets often ponder on death, trying to share their concerns and worries. Thus, DEATH is not formidable, it is natural, a mystery that every poet tries to solve. Our findings also indicate that the attitude towards DEATH in contemporary English poetry is rather ambivalent. On the one hand, it is perceived as an inevitable event that lies beyond a person's control and, as such, brings about growing dissatisfaction and profound regret about unfulfilled dreams. Furthermore, the inevitability of death is tightly connected with the fluidity of time and serves as a constant reminder to live our life to the fullest. In this view, DEATH is regarded as the end of the journey of life, its final destination. On the other hand, the religious view on the phenomenon that is reflected in the strong belief in the afterlife and possible rebirth brings enormous comfort to poets who are in fear of dying and suffering. Another interesting and surprising finding presents a positive view on DEATH as liberation from daily struggles. However, there are two perspectives on the liberating property of DEATH in contemporary English poetry. The first one is purely religious: it states that life is full of misery and dreadful hardships that we must endure every day, while death brings them all to an end, and our immortal soul can finally thrive in Heaven. From the second perspective, DEATH is viewed as oblivion, and it is not the desire to get to Heaven and see "The Almighty" that consoles the poet, but a fervent wish to put an end to the suffering that the person can't stand anymore. In this case, DEATH is an escape that an emotionally numb person seeks. Significantly, the poems are saturated with pangs of remorse and regret rather than the fear of DEATH or dying.

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