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Conceptualization of Death: Subjective Depictions in Selected Romantic Poems

Abstract

The theme of death is highly philosophical in the poetry of the British Romanticists. This paper attempts to explore how the poets like Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Byron viewed death in their selected poems and the possibility of why they were interested in this particular theme. Their perceptions on death were varied and subjective. Wordsworth saw it as a punisher of crime. Shelley evoked the omnipresent nature of death. Byron saw it as a means of eternity to merge in love and Keats viewed it as an awakening to life that he sees as a mere dream. Despite the different analyses on death, these poets connect in the fact that they believed in some kind of a life beyond death.

Keywords: Death, Romanticism, Afterlife, Secret admirer, Death poem.

Romanticism is a deep scrutiny into the common man's life from the various aspects of how their everyday life gets unraveled through the pangs and sorrows of their chores. Different aspects of the movement have always been the key topics of research. Death was an intriguing subject in the literary world during the Romantic age. This paper is an attempt to explore how the Romantic poets of the British history of English literature, such as Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Byron, depicted the philosophy of death through their subjective perceptions in the selected romantic poems. The word 'death' comes from Old English 'deao,' which in turn comes from Proto—Germanic 'dauthu.' This comes from the Proto—Indo—European stem 'dheu,' meaning the process, the act or the condition of dying. In Old English, it meant 'total cessation of life, act or fact of dying, state of being dead; cause of death.' Death is an ever haunting truth that stamps down human pride and pomp. It is an inevitable and the most certain event in life. All the mystical aspects that one encounters in life are an outcome of man's endeavor to elicit truth in this regard. English literature has

always aimed to unravel the mystery of death and its after effects vainly. Art has been successful in depicting views on death but not the actual truth. A genre of poetry called the death poem originated in the literary traditions of East Asian cultures, mostly in Japan and during the certain periods of Chinese history and Joseon Korea. It reflects on death and the eminent death of the author, coupled with a meaningful observation on life. Zen Buddhism originated the practice of writing a death poem which conceptualizes the worldview that the material world is transient and impermanent, that attachment to it causes suffering and ultimately all reality is an emptiness or absence of self- nature.

The Romantic age of the British history of English literature holds different views on death. It was an artistic, literary, musical and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century and it found its best expression through poetry. The Romantic age was emphatically an age of poetry. “The river of English poetry, which has flowed so serenely between the ordered banks of the classical tradition, now began to break and eddy as it swept down new and narrower channels through wider country, under less tranquil skies”(Prasad 65). Death occupied in the works of the Romantic poets, perhaps due to three reasons. First, nature was the central construct of the period. The mutual interest the writers showed towards the theme of death was perhaps due to this identification with nature. Nature marks seasons, which are never eternal. The birth of one season marks the death of the other. Life symbolizes this seasonal nature which is never frozen forever. Winter represents death. The lengthened nights of winter symbolize the prolonged darkness of death. At times, the seasonal nature of life gets altered that death can appear at any moment in life, like an unexpected winter. Second, the chief subject of the literary world was the essential nobleness of common men and the value of the individual. Perhaps the Romanticists had incorporated the theme of death in their works to help the folk to brood their consciousness of the right and wrong of leading a moral life that could aid them in conceptualizing salvation and afterlife. Third, the writers were greatly influenced by the turmoil of French Revolution. They wrote their works amidst the revolution as they had to witness death and demises of the countrymen. The hinging happenings around and the deaths in large numbers might have evoked the literary segment of their consciousness to ponder upon the concept of death.

William Wordsworth, the Lake poet and the first generation poet of the Romantic period, addresses death as a very conscious aspect of the universe that has a moral sense of right and wrong. In the poem, the poet categorizes men as good and bad depending on their deeds during their life span. Death offers eternal rest or restless walk with respect to the

category to which men belong. In the words of the poet, the statutes of the land are slow in their act of sharing, referring to the cold response of the living to punish and prevent their sins. This moderate ascending of the laws creates a laxity, but it does not weaken the power of death to punish and prevent the brutal happenings of the world.

The adage on all tongues, 'Murder will out,'
How shall your ancient warnings work for good
In the full might they hitherto have shown
If for the deliberate shedder of man's blood
Survive not Judgment that requires his own?

The poet sees death both as a punisher and preventer of the violations of ecstasy. He advocates what happens upon death. He sees death as a means to rub off the brutality of men. At the same time, his view is that death offers eternal guarding to virtuous people by angels and for them, death becomes an eternal gift. Whether evil or virtuous, or whether conferred with eternal rest or restless walk, the poet is well aware of the inevitability of the fast approaching death to all alike. Hartley Coleridge describes the sonnet as "more powerful than anything else his later years have produced."

The second generations of poets, such as Byron, Keats and Shelley also hold views on death. Lord Byron explores the themes of love and death in his poem "Love and Death," where he is least bothered about the impending death which surrounds him. For Byron, death meant nothingness. His comparison of death was to love that he considered as eternal. Love stood above death for him. The presence of the enemy, the hurdles of the shipwreck and fever, and the disaster of earthquake and other violent sufferings do not separate him from his beloved. Even in the fading thought of his unconsciousness, he longed only for his beloved.

And when the convulsive throes denied my breath
The faintest utterance to my fading thought,
To thee—to—thee—e'en in the gasp of death
My spirit turned, oh! oftener than it ought.

He is not aware of the mystery of afterlife or his perishing life. Or rather the awareness does not confront him. He does not plunge into the abyss of the philosophy of death. Death is all around him, every step and every breath he takes pushes him into the confines of death but all the quest of him is for his beloved and not for the veil of death which other poets desired to unfold. Byron saw death as an eternal passage to merge with his beloved.

To John Keats, as he puts in his poem "On Death," life is one prolonged dream. Rising up from sleep happens out of our wish and so does death. He questions the wisdom of death as being an eternal sleep. He suggests that if life is a dream, then death is a kind of waking up rather than being an eternal sleep. He introduces the worldly wisdom that "life is but a dream."

Can death be sleep, when life is but a dream,
And scenes of bliss pass as a phantom by?
The transient pleasures as a vision seem,
And yet we think the greatest pain's to die.

The poet laments over man's futile roaming on the rugged paths in chase of undesirable pleasures to lead a life of woes; and he even mourns over man's reluctance to abandon them. He feels strange at man not daring to view his future doom of death, which is to awake to a new world of unknown realm of discovery.

How strange it is that man on earth should roam,
And lead a life of woe, but not forsake
His rugged path; nor dare he view alone
His future doom which is but to awake.

Keats chose not to fear death but to accept its inevitability and to see it as an escape from the pangs of life. Death assures relief from all the pangs we endure. It is rather far from the fears one creates for oneself.

In the poem, "Death is Here and Death is There," Percy Bysshe Shelley declares the ultimate truth of the universality of death. The poem talks about the omnipresent nature of death, death which is ever ready to engulf any life anytime, anywhere. The poet says about its presence all around us, within us, beneath us and above us. He declares us as death.

Death is here and death is there,
Death is busy everywhere,
All around, within, beneath,
Above is death- and we are death

Death has been personified as a man in the poem to imprint his signature on everything we are. Its face of fixity has been established since time immemorial. Whoever we are, whatever we feel and know and fear, death is a truth, whose approach is as certain as day and night. The poet says that the process of death gear up through various stages. In the word of the poet, death claims all that we endure in our life. At first, our pleasures die, then our hopes

follow to die and then our fears, which is all left to die. When all these are dead, the debt of life remains exact. The poet philosophically declares that dust claims dust and we all die too. All things on this earth that we love and cherish like ourselves must fade and perish. Such is the adage of the everlasting day. He is well aware of the presence of the ever approaching death all around us. He unshackles the transience of the world. All we long to gain are materialistic pleasures. But to Shelley, they die first. Departure of pleasures instills hope in us which die next, and that create fears and that too are futile as they follow death to the poet. The poet reflects his views on death and explores the true meaning of life's transient nature, death and immortality. All the upheld passions that we gain are futile and will fade away. Shelley has set a philosophical and moral stern explanation of events of death in the poem.

Apart from how the selected poems analyzed the philosophy of death, it is more like a secret admirer, surpassed by none. Death can be personified as a woman whose beauty has not been scupper despite the ages bidden. She steps in everyone's lives without permission and listens none. She admires everyone in secret and shadows in every step taken by man, with her mystical allure to seize her hour. Never weird is her arrival though it may be fair to some and unfair to the rest. All the glories gained in the play of life, all the pangs prolonged, all amities made and the enmities saved prove to be vain. They blow upon her sight to stamp out in the end. Ways to her are sordid and varied. Her eyes may tender, sedate or fume. Some men savor her kind kiss. Her teeth crush others. Most people get entangled in her dark long hair. Her lap rests a few and her stab rests the rest of people. She is an abortion to life. She is the same fortune that all share alike. She is bisexual and the union with her is a matter of certainty, but what follows the union is ever unknown as she is death.

"Life is nothing without an ever present sense of death. Each expression of life's preciousness is balanced by an image of impending doom." The Romanticists expressed themselves on the dimensions of death, which paved the way to set a high standard for literature. Death meant different to the Romantic poets. The subjective depiction of the universality of death by the Romantic poets is a unique feature of the era. The Romantic poets set an everlasting perception on the philosophy of death. The mystery of death is ever intriguing to the writers. There is a pervading symbolism attached to death in different cultures and religions. Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Byron conceptualized the philosophy of death that blowed their consciousness in the age of Romanticism. For Wordsworth, death is a kind of punishment to the evil men. Byron saw it as an eternal passage to merge in love. Shelley evokes its omnipresent nature. And Keats sees it as an awakening to the dream of

life. Though these Romanticists had entirely different analysis and subjective perceptions on death, they boil up from the serious, contemplative reflection over the philosophy of death and connect in the fact that they believed in some kind of an afterlife. The uniqueness of it is that none are aware of its actual truth as the only way to find it out is to actually die. Death would continue to be a central theme to be occupied in genres of literature until life exists. Like death is inevitable, its indulgence in genres is also inevitable due to the unique mystery of its forbiddance to wrap off itself, despite its portrayal in ways of infinity.

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