

+1 English Note - DEATH THE LEVELLER



DEATH THE LEVELLER *James Shirley*



Summary

The poem "Death the Leveller" by James Shirley is a reflection on the inevitability of death and its equalizing effect on all people, regardless of their status or achievements. It addresses the idea that the glories and achievements of individuals, including kings and powerful rulers, are fleeting and ultimately meaningless in the face of death.

The poet begins by stating that the accomplishments and positions of power that people attain in life are like shadows, lacking substance and permanence. No one can escape or defend against the power of fate, as death comes for everyone, even kings who wield scepters and wear crowns. Death treats all individuals equally, reducing them to the same level in the end, like the common man who use tools like the scythe and spade for farming.

The poem suggests that some individuals may achieve success and recognition through acts of violence, symbolized by the men who "reap the field" and gain laurels through killing. However, their strength and power eventually wane, and they too succumb to death. The poet emphasizes that everyone, sooner or later, must accept their fate and yield their breath to death.

The poem also underscores the fleeting nature of human accomplishments and praises the actions of the just, suggesting that only righteous deeds have a lasting impact. In the end, the poem's message is that true significance lies not in worldly achievements, but in the moral and just actions that leave a positive legacy even after death.

This poem serves as a contemplative piece that encourages reflection on the impermanence of human glory and the importance of leading a just and righteous life. It emphasizes the idea that

death is the great equalizer, and no one can escape its embrace, regardless of their worldly status or achievements.

Analysis

The title of the poem, "Death the Leveller," immediately suggests that the poem will explore the concept of death as something that equalizes or levels all individuals, regardless of their social or worldly status. This theme of death as an impartial force is central to the poem's message.

Theme:



The central theme of the poem is the universality of death and its ability to strip away the distinctions of power, wealth, and social status. The poet reflects on the fleeting nature of human achievements and highlights the idea that true significance lies in one's moral actions.

Structure and Form:

The poem consists of three quatrains (four-line stanzas) with a regular rhyme scheme (ABAB). This structure lends a sense of order and symmetry to the poem, emphasizing the inevitability and predictability of death.

Imagery and Symbols:

- Glories of our blood and state: This phrase represents the honor and prestige associated with one's lineage and social position.
- Shadows, not substantial things: The poet uses the image of shadows to convey the idea that worldly accomplishments are not substantial and temporary, much like the fleeting nature of shadows.
- Sceptre and Crown: Symbols of power and authority, typically associated with kings and rulers.
- The poor crooked scythe and spade: These represent common tools used for farming and manual labor, symbolizing the ordinary working class.

- Purple altar: This image suggests a sacrificial altar, emphasizing the idea that even victorious individuals must ultimately sacrifice their lives to death.

Key Ideas and Analysis:

1. The Inevitability of Death: The poem opens by asserting that no one can escape death's grasp. It is an impartial force that touches both the powerful and the ordinary. This idea serves as a reminder of the transitory nature of life.
2. Equality in Death: The poet emphasizes the idea that death makes everyone equal. It doesn't discriminate based on wealth, status, or power. Kings and rulers, who yield great authority, are brought down to the same level as common labourers when they die.
3. The Futility of Worldly Achievements: The poem suggests that the glories and achievements of life, such as power, wealth, and even military conquests ("fresh laurels"), are ultimately futile in the face of death. These achievements are like "shadows" and do not offer lasting significance.
4. Moral Value and Legacy: The poem encourages readers to consider the moral worth of their actions. It suggests that only the actions of the just and righteous individuals have a lasting impact. Such actions are compared to blossoms that continue to flourish even after the individual has passed away.
5. Acceptance of Fate: The poem conveys the idea that all individuals, regardless of their station in life, must ultimately accept their fate and surrender to death. It serves as a sobering reminder of human mortality.

Relevance to Students:

For students, this poem provides an opportunity to explore profound themes related to life, death, and the pursuit of significance. It encourages critical thinking about the impermanence of worldly achievements and the enduring value of moral actions. The poem's structure and imagery make it accessible for analysis and discussion, helping students develop their literary analysis skills.

1. Why is death called a leveller?

Death is often referred to as a "leveller" because it has the unique and universal ability to equalize all individuals, regardless of their social, economic, or worldly status. In life, people occupy various positions in society, hold different levels of power, and accumulate wealth and prestige. However,

when death comes, it strips away these distinctions and reduces everyone to the same fundamental state: mortality. Death does not discriminate between kings and commoners, the wealthy and the impoverished, the powerful and the powerless. It treats all individuals with impartiality, emphasizing the inherent equality of all human beings in the face of the inevitable end. Thus, death is called a leveller because it levels the playing field of life, highlighting the transient nature of human achievements and reminding us of our shared mortality.

2. What does 'scythe and spade' and 'sceptre and crown' symbolize?

In the poem "Death the Leveller" by James Shirley, the phrases "scythe and spade" and "sceptre and crown" serve as powerful symbols that contrast the humble with the grand, highlighting the theme of death's equalizing effect. The "scythe and spade" symbolize the tools of common labourers , representing the ordinary and often physically demanding work associated with everyday life. On the other hand, the "sceptre and crown" symbolize symbols of power, authority, and royalty, representing the highest positions in society. Together, these contrasting symbols convey the idea that death makes no distinction between the lowly and the mighty, reducing both labourers and rulers to the same fate. It underscores the poem's central message that death is a great equalizer, emphasizing the transitory nature of worldly status and achievements. This symbolism encourages every man to reflect on the ephemeral nature of power and the ultimate inevitability of mortality.

3. Why does the poet say that 'there is no armour against fate'?

The poet's assertion that "there is no armour against Fate" in the poem "Death the Leveller" by James Shirley reflects the idea that human beings are ultimately powerless in the face of destiny and mortality. In life, people often strive to protect themselves from various dangers and uncertainties by using armor as a metaphorical shield. However, when it comes to the inexorable force of fate, no amount of physical or metaphorical armor can provide protection. Fate, embodied by death in the poem, is an unstoppable and impartial force that eventually claims everyone. This line emphasizes the idea that death is an unavoidable aspect of the human experience, and it serves as a reminder of the futility of trying to evade or resist the natural course of life.This concept encourages contemplation of the limitations of human power and control in the grand scheme of existence.

4. What does 'death's purple altar' refer to?

In the poem "Death the Leveller" by James Shirley, the phrase "death's purple altar" is a metaphorical expression that symbolizes the idea of death as a relentless and inevitable force that

demands sacrifices from all living beings. The use of the word "purple" may signify blooshed in the battlefield a royal or regal quality, highlighting that even those who hold positions of great power and authority are not exempt from death's grasp. The term "altar" suggests a place of sacrifice or offering, implying that death requires individuals to surrender their lives as an offering. Essentially, "death's purple altar" serves as a vivid image to convey the idea that death is an inescapable fate that every person, regardless of their status, wealth, or influence, must ultimately face and offer themselves when time comes. This metaphor encourages to contemplate the universality and inevitability of death, regardless of one's worldly accomplishments.

5. What does the phrase 'victor- victim' mean?

The phrase "victor-victim" in the poem "Death the Leveller" by James Shirley is a powerful juxtaposition of two contrasting roles. In this context, it signifies individuals who have achieved victory or success in life, often through acts of conquest or achievement, but who ultimately become victims of death. It suggests that even those who have experienced triumph or glory during their lives cannot escape the eventual fate of mortality. The phrase highlights the transitory nature of worldly success and emphasizes that no matter how victorious or powerful a person may be, they will eventually succumb to the universal fate of death. This phrase serves as a reminder of the impermanence of human achievements and encourages contemplation of the profound theme of mortality in the poem.

6. What is the message of the poem 'Death the Leveller'?

The poem "Death the Leveller" by James Shirley conveys a profound message about the universality and impartiality of death. Its central message is that death is a great equalizer, making no distinctions based on social status, wealth, or worldly achievements. The poem emphasizes that all human glories and accomplishments, such as power, authority, and conquests, are temporary and fleeting. Ultimately, they hold no sway in the face of death. The poem encourages readers to reflect on the transitory nature of life and the importance of living justly and morally. It suggests that only the actions of the just and righteous individuals have lasting significance and that these actions are the ones that truly "smell sweet and blossom in their dust." In essence, the poem serves as a reminder that while worldly success may be ephemeral, the legacy of one's virtuous deeds can endure beyond the grave.

7. Elaborate the idea in the following lines:

Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet and blossom in the dust.

The lines "Only the actions of the just, Smell sweet and blossom in the dust" from the poem "Death the Leveller" by James Shirley underscore the idea that it is the virtuous and morally upright actions of individuals that leave a lasting and positive impact even after their physical existence has ended.

Firstly, when the poet mentions "Only the actions of the just," he is emphasizing that the deeds of those who lead a righteous and ethical life are the ones that endure and are remembered. These actions are described as "just," which implies that they are fair, honorable, and in harmony with moral principles. In contrast, actions driven by greed, cruelty, or selfishness do not have the same enduring quality.

The phrase "Smell sweet and blossom in the dust" uses vivid imagery to convey the idea that the good deeds of virtuous individuals continue to have a positive influence long after their death. "Smell sweet" suggests that these actions are remembered with fondness and admiration by

others. "Blossom in the dust" evokes the image of flowers or beauty emerging from a seemingly barren or mundane environment, emphasizing the idea that even in the face of mortality and decay, the impact of virtuous actions remains fresh and vibrant.

8. What are the poetic devices used in the poem?

In the poem "Death the Leveller" by James Shirley, several poetic devices are employed to convey its themes and messages effectively. These devices enhance the poem's literary qualities and make it more engaging for readers, including students.

1. Metaphor: The poem is rich in metaphorical language. For example, death is metaphorically referred to as an "icy hand" and an "altar," emphasizing its powerful and relentless nature. The comparison of worldly achievements to "shadows" underscores their transient nature. Death is also called as a leveller.
2. Personification : There is personification in the line " Death lays his icy hands on kings.
3. Metonymy : The poem employs metonymy in the phrases 'sceptre and crown' which denotes royal men and 'scythe and spade' which denotes the common man or the working class.
4. Oxymoron :There is also an instance of oxymoron in 'victor-victim', where two contraries are used together.

5. Symbolism: Symbols are used to represent abstract ideas. "Sceptre and Crown" symbolize power and authority, while "scythe and spade" symbolize labor and humility. "Purple altar" symbolizes the inevitability of death.

6. Imagery: The poem uses vivid imagery to create mental pictures for the reader. Examples include the "garlands wither on your brow" and "victor-victim bleeds." These images evoke a strong emotional response.

7. Alliteration: There is an alliteration in the phrase "Sceptre and Crown," which adds a musical quality to the poem.

8. Irony: The poem employs irony by contrasting the temporary nature of worldly success with the enduring impact of just actions.

9. Rhyme Scheme: The poem follows a regular abab rhyme scheme, creating a sense of rhythm.

9. Prepare a write up on the helplessness of man as portrayed in the poem Death the Leveller.

The poem "Death the Leveller" by James Shirley masterfully portrays the profound helplessness of humanity in the face of the inevitable force of death. Throughout the poem, Shirley emphasizes the idea that no matter how powerful, wealthy, or accomplished a person may be, they are ultimately powerless against the universal fate of mortality.

One of the primary ways this helplessness is depicted is through the imagery of "armour against Fate." The poet asserts that there is no defense or protection that can shield individuals from the grasp of death. This vividly conveys the idea that humanity is defenseless against the finality of death, no matter how much wealth or power they amass.

The phrase "Sceptre and Crown must tumble down" underscores the transient nature of worldly authority and success. Even kings, who wield the highest symbols of power, are brought low by death, and their crowns and scepters hold no sway in the face of mortality.

The poem's central message is that all individuals, from kings to commoners, must ultimately accept their fate and yield to death. It serves as a poignant reminder of the helplessness of humanity in the grand scheme of existence, encouraging plus one students to reflect on the limitations of

human control and the impermanence of worldly achievements. It also underscores the importance of leading a just and moral life, as it is through one's actions that a lasting legacy can be created, despite the inevitability of death.

10. Explain the significance of the title of the poem 'Death the Leveller'

The title of the poem, "Death the Leveller," holds significant thematic and conceptual importance. It encapsulates the central idea and message of the poem by emphasizing the profound role that death plays in equalizing all individuals, regardless of their social or worldly status.

1. Equality in Death: The term "leveller" suggests an entity or force that brings about equality. In this context, death is portrayed as the ultimate equalizer, erasing all distinctions based on wealth, power, or social standing. Whether one is a king with a crown or a commoner with a simple life, death treats all individuals with impartiality, reducing them to the same fate. The title emphasizes the poem's overarching theme of the universality of death.
2. Impermanence of Human Achievements: By emphasizing death as the great leveller, the title underscores the impermanence of human accomplishments and glories. It reminds readers that the wealth, power, and prestige people amass during their lifetimes are fleeting and ultimately meaningless in the face of mortality. This challenges the conventional notions of success and highlights the transient nature of worldly achievements.
3. Provoking Thought: The title itself is thought-provoking and draws readers into contemplating the profound concept it represents. It sets the stage for the poem's exploration of the theme of mortality and serves as a reminder of the fundamental and inescapable aspect of human existence.

The title "Death the Leveller" successfully encapsulates the core message of the poem and prompts readers, including students, to reflect on the theme of death's equalizing force and the ephemeral nature of human achievements.

11. How does the poet present death as a leveller in the poem?

The poet, James Shirley, effectively presents death as a leveller in the poem by highlighting the universal and impartial nature of death's influence on all individuals, regardless of their social or worldly distinctions. Shirley achieves this by using powerful metaphors and vivid imagery.

Firstly, the poet compares the glories of human blood and state to "shadows, not substantial things." This metaphor emphasizes the transient and insubstantial nature of worldly achievements,

suggesting that they lack lasting value. By likening them to shadows, Shirley conveys that these glories are fleeting and do not endure. This comparison sets the stage for the idea that death treats all individuals equally, as shadows are indiscriminately cast aside when darkness falls.

Additionally, the poem's imagery of "Sceptre and Crown / Must tumble down" serves to underscore the notion that death levels the playing field. These symbols of power and authority are shown as ultimately powerless against the inexorable force of death. Kings and rulers, who wield scepters and wear crowns, are brought low and rendered equal to the "poor crooked scythe and spade" used by common laborers. This vivid imagery vividly illustrates the helplessness of humanity in the face of mortality, emphasizing death's role as a leveller.



12. Read the poem and write a note of appreciation.

Death is Here and Death is There

-Percy Bysshe Shelley

Death is here and death is there,

Death is busy everywhere,

All around, within, beneath, Above is death - and we are death.

Death has set his mark and seal

On all we are and we feel,

On all we know and all we fear,

First our pleasures die - and then

Our hopes, and then our fears - and

When These are dead, the debt is due,

Dust claims dust- and we die too.

All things that we love and cherish,

Like ourselves must fade and perish;

Such is our rude mortal lot -

Love itself would, did they not.



"Death is Here and Death is There" by Percy Bysshe Shelley is a poignant and thought-provoking exploration of the omnipresence of death and its inevitable impact on human existence. The poem is a profound meditation on the universal nature of mortality, and it conveys a sense of resignation and acceptance of the inexorable cycle of life and death.

Shelley's skillful use of repetition in the opening lines, with the recurrence of the word "death," creates a sense of inescapable and all-encompassing mortality. It underscores the idea that death is an ever-present reality, a constant companion throughout our lives.

The poem delves into the idea that death leaves its mark on everything, from our emotions and experiences to our very beings. It's as though death is an indelible part of the human condition, something that defines us as much as our joys and sorrows.

Shelley's progression from the fading of pleasures to the eventual embrace of death as the ultimate debt collector is a powerful metaphor for the transience of life's pleasures and the inevitability of our own mortality. The poem serves as a stark reminder that all that we hold dear, including our hopes and fears, will eventually succumb to the relentless passage of time.

The closing lines, "Love itself would, did they not," suggest that even love, the most powerful and enduring of human emotions, would fade away if not for death. This notion adds a layer of complexity to the poem, inviting readers to contemplate the interplay between mortality and the intensity of human emotions.

The poem follows the rhyme scheme aabb. In the first stanza itself we can see an anaphora where the word 'death' is repeated in the first and second line. Another example of anaphora is in the word 'on' in the second stanza. There are a lot of instances of alliteration in the poem like dead, debt, dust, die etc. Assonance also is found in our hopes, our fears etc.

In conclusion, "Death is Here and Death is There" is a striking reflection on the omnipresence of death and its impact on the human experience. Shelley's use of repetition, metaphor, and philosophical exploration makes this poem a compelling work of literature that prompts readers, including plus one students, to ponder the profound questions of life, death, and the enduring nature of love and mortality.

13. Read the poem and write an appreciation

My Journey's just Begun

(Ellen Brenneman)

Don't think of me as gone away

My journey's just begun

Life holds so many facets

This earth is but one.

Just think of me as resting

From the sorrows and the tears

In a place of warmth and comfort

Where there are no days and years.

Think of how I must be wishing

That you could know today

How nothing but your sadness

Can really go away.

And think of me as living

In the hearts of those I touched

For nothing loved is ever lost

And I know I was loved so much.

(Hints: theme, message, tone, poetic devices etc)



"My Journey's just Begun" by Ellen Brenneman is a heartfelt and comforting poem that explores themes of love, loss, and the enduring presence of a departed loved one. The poem's tone is one of reassurance and solace, offering a message of hope to those grieving.

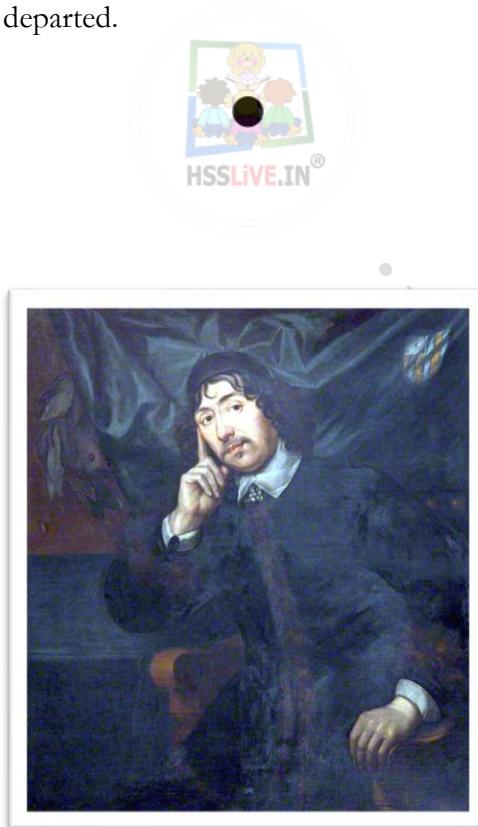
The primary theme of the poem is the idea that death is not an end but the beginning of a different journey. The speaker encourages the reader not to perceive the departed as entirely gone but to think of them as embarking on a new phase of existence. This theme provides a sense of continuity and offers solace to those mourning a loved one. The poem's message is one of comfort and empathy. It acknowledges the pain of loss and suggests that the departed individual is now free from suffering and sorrow. The use of phrases like "resting" and "warmth and comfort" conveys the idea of a peaceful afterlife, where there is no more pain or distress. The poem encourages the reader to focus on the positive memories and love shared with the departed, as these are everlasting.

Poetically, the poem employs metaphors and vivid imagery to convey its message. The idea of the departed "living in the hearts of those I touched" is a powerful metaphor for the enduring impact of their presence. The use of repetition, as seen in the phrase "think of me," reinforces the poem's central message of remembering and cherishing the departed loved one.

The poem has four stanzas of four lines each. There is no rhyme scheme or punctuation used in this poem. There are some words with end rhymes like 'sorrows, tears', 'where, there' etc. There is an epigrammatic line in the last stanza "And think of me as living

In the hearts of those I touched". The poem is ending on an optimistic note.

In conclusion, "My Journey's just Begun" is a touching poem that offers solace and reassurance to those mourning the loss of a loved one. Its themes of love's enduring presence and the idea of a peaceful afterlife provide comfort, and its gentle tone encourages reflection on the positive memories and impact of the departed.



James Shirley (1596-1666): A Brief Biography

James Shirley was an English playwright and poet born in London in 1596. Not much is known about his early life and family, but he is believed to have attended the Merchant Taylors' School and later studied at St. John's College, Oxford. He lived during a tumultuous period in English history, marked by political and social upheaval, including the English Civil War. Shirley's life and career were influenced by these events.

James Shirley is best known for his significant contributions to English Renaissance drama, particularly during the Caroline era (the reign of King Charles I). He was a prolific playwright, and his works span a variety of genres, including tragedies, comedies, and masques. Shirley's plays were well-received during his lifetime, and he was associated with the Caroline playwrights who continued the dramatic traditions of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras.

Some of his notable works include "The Lady of Pleasure," "The Traitor," and "The Cardinal." He was known for his skill in blending humor with serious themes, and his plays often explored topics like love, ambition, and power.

However, as the political climate in England became increasingly turbulent during the English Civil War, the theaters were closed, and many playwrights, including Shirley, faced financial hardships. Shirley's career declined during this period, and he eventually turned to teaching to support himself.

James Shirley's legacy lies in his substantial contribution to English drama during the early 17th century, and his works continue to be studied and performed by scholars and theater enthusiasts today. His ability to capture the spirit and themes of his time through his plays makes him an important figure in the history of English literature.

Prepared By : **hssMozhi Team**

Supervised By : **Reshma Prabhakaran , HSST English , Govt HSS , Bharathannoor , Tvm**

FOR +2 Malayalam Note  [**CLICK HERE**](#)

FOR +2 English Note  [**CLICK HERE**](#)

Please Visit Our Online Malayalam Books Shop

hssMozhi's Amazon Shop



To Join hssMozhi **WhatsApp Family Group**

 **CLICK HERE**

