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Death in the Early Modern Period

Regardless of race, religion, age, or gender, death affects everyone. All of mankind deals with death, as it is a natural occurrence in life. The way mankind perceives death is a continual topic of conversation particularly in regards to its role in literature. During the early modern period known as the English renaissance, Europe remained a Christian state therefore; death and a potential afterlife were recognized although not widely agreed upon. The vast majority of Christians believed heaven was a place where believers go upon dying in order to live for an eternity in the presence of God. Christians in this period also believed heaven freed people from sin and various other earthly torments, such as suffering and pain. In early modern literature, death was traditionally encountered in two perspectives. One argument is that the early modern period handled death more appropriately than modern literature, teaching acceptance of death as an end to life. Another argument views death as a “mortality crisis,” in which people should challenge death and deny it to ultimately achieve inner peace and salvation. Robert Herrick and John Donne were two prominent writers of the early modern period whom shared opposing viewpoints of death. This is evident in their works in that Herrick presents death from a Cavalier perspective and Donne from a Metaphysical view.

As a famous Cavalier poet, Herrick supported the monarchy and aimed to create poems that embraced life, culture, and the finer things and did not choose to dwell on scientific matters of religion or philosophy. Anything too dogmatic or intense in nature was not to be trusted by Cavalier poets. Most Cavalier poems aimed to celebrate beauty, love, nature, sensuality, and honor. Robert Herrick's poem, "To Daffodils," reinforces the "impermanence" (Denman, 119) of life, more specifically beauty. To begin this poem, Herrick describes a sense of grieving as the daffodils die so quickly. The opening of the poem, "Fair daffodils, we weep to see | you haste away so soon," addresses this sadness. He writes that the daffodils have yet to see noon and urges them to "stay, stay, | until the hasting day | has run | but to the even-song." The daffodils in his opinion have died all too soon. Herrick compares human life with the life of the daffodils in saying, "As quick a growth to meet decay | as you, or anything | we die." Just like the short duration of the flowers, humans may also die away soon. Once you die, life is "ne'er to be found again" and ceases to exist.

Herrick's poem takes a complex idea, death, and simplifies it down with a narrow focus. The central argument of this poem assumes a light approach to death, arguing that there is essentially no life after youth; the only time to live is now. The symbolism presented by Herrick in this poem is that like the flowers, beauty lives a very short life in this world. Herrick places great emphasis on the diminishment of beauty that comes with the passage of time. The youth, like the spring daffodils, crawl to their death after a short life span. The best time for everyone to enjoy is youth because the quality of life after youth diminishes. The speaker of this poem recognizes that life should be appreciated and lived to the fullest. Beauty is a temporary grace. The sad yet thoughtful tone that

surrounds the entire poem seems to demonstrate an acceptance of death and finality as youth slips away. Herrick makes no mention of an after life and leaves his belief of God open to interpretation at the end of the poem. There is nothing in this poem that mentions hopes for new blooms and regrowth next year, or of heavenly rewards for the faithful and honorable because he believes there is only one time to live in life and it is now.

John Donne represents a differing approach to death. Donne was a Metaphysical poet and his poem acknowledges that life continues long after death. As a metaphysical poet, Donne's work focused on reality beyond the everyday world, entertaining questions about God, creation, and the afterlife. Metaphysical poetry didn't contain classic images of nature but instead relied on scientific references. In his poem, "Death, be not proud," Donne presents an argument against the power and finality of death and states that humans should not cooperatively accept death as an end all to life. Donne addresses death as a person to begin the poem and says that people are mistaken in treating death as a fearsome thing. He writes that death thinks it has the power to end life but Donne is quick to establish that death "canst thou kill [him]" (Donne, 4). He compares death to "rest" and "sleep," (5) things that are pleasurable. Donne goes on to make it sound like the best men volunteer for death when he says, "and soonest out best men with thee do go | rest of their bones and soul's delivery" (7-8). The poem gains intensity in line 9, as most Petrarchan sonnets do, as Donne claims that death doesn't act on free will but instead is controlled by other things like "fate, chance, kings, and desperate men." Donne's confidence over death grows when he states that "poppy 'or charms can make us sleep as well" (11). The final words of the poem "and death shall be no more; Death thou shalt die," (14) Donne predicts the end of life itself.

The ultimate argument of this poem is that good Christians will experience death and an end to life on earth; however, he or she cannot be killed because death is just something Christians pass through on their way to an afterlife or eternity. His comparison of death to "sleep" originates from the Christian belief that when faithful Christians die, they are only "dead" until the Day of Judgment comes and Christ returns to Earth. They compare this length of time to a period of "sleep." At this point, time ceases, eternity begins, and all the Christians who died and were faithful will "wake up" to be accepted into Heaven. Therefore, death should give humans pleasure when it is finally met.

Addressing Death as a person, the speaker warns Death against pride in his power over humans. The poet criticizes Death as a slave to other forces like fate, chance, kings, and desperate men. Death is not solely in control of mankind's existence. A variety of other powers exercise their will in taking lives. To Donne, death stands in the way to eternal bliss with its inflated pride and he suggests in this poem to disregard Death and its lingering presence. Donne addresses Death with arrogance because of his conviction that life does not end with death.

Through a close analysis, the poems of Donne and Herrick differ in a variety of ways. Donne's works contained extremely complicated thought and serious questions about the existence of God and afterlife, in comparison to Herrick. Herrick's poem points to the inevitability of decay and death but with no hint of any obligation to earn a place in the afterlife by living a godly existence now. Donne however, explicitly delights in his assurance of an afterlife. Herrick's tone is timid and indefinite. He writes as though he is unsure of what death brings. Donne's tone is more confident and self-fulfilling. He does not appear to be afraid of the coming of death. Also important to Donne in this poem was

dying well, a concept known as “Ars Moriendi” or the “art of dying.” This concept taught people to die with dignity and courage. This is in contrast to Herrick who seems to accept death, hardly engaging in the thought of life after death. Donne, unlike Herrick explicitly states a belief that death is a passage to the next life. His arguments are also drawn from philosophy, theology, and science, rather than nature like the work of Herrick.

Ultimately, the poems of Herrick and Donne, while expressing different ideas about death and the afterlife, both reinforce the concept of “carpe diem.” Each author encourages readers to live life in the moment despite the fact that death is inevitable for everyone.

They also both also contain characteristics of the concept, “memento mori” or “remember death.” Judgment day is always forthcoming just for some, like Herrick, it means the end of life and for others, Donne, it means a new beginning.

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