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The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge: The inevitability of death

Considered to be a semi-autographical novel reflecting the fears and trepidations of writer Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* provides a compelling glimpse into the mind of an introspective poet as he plunges deep into the depths of his own mind while also simultaneously adapting to a foreign environment. Using descriptive language and personal flashbacks, the symbolic character of Malte is able to despondently analyze the perils of modernity while undertaking an ontology of his inner self. As the novel progresses and the intense dismay of Malte becomes crystal clear, the fascination with the concept of death takes center stage as the protagonist critically ponders the inevitability regarding the act of dying. Through this morbid fascination, Rilke proceeds to transcend the societal norms of life and death, and thus offers an alternative worldview regarding the inescapable event. Rather than simply accept death through spiritual or even physical perspectives, Rilke offers a more critical view as he descends into the concept of death through the eyes of an outcast.

Rather than conform to the traditional view of death as the final destination within the journey of life, Rilke ventures to claim that everyone carries a sense of death within them. As Malte describes through one of his early diary entries, death is something that “previously you knew (or perhaps sensed) that you had your death within you, as the fruit contains its kernel” (Rilke 6). This comparison gives death a form of physical characteristics, likening it to an anatomical object similar to a body part. In addition to this material comparison, Malte compares life and death to a piece of clothing that one simply has to put on, as evidenced when he states, “You come along, you find a life, ready-made, you only have to put it on” (Rilke 6). This illustration illustrates the image that death is equivalent to an evolving creature that grows within everyone. And as an individual becomes weaker, the size and power of death become stronger.

Mirroring the perspective of author Rainer Maria Rilke, Malte views the modernistic city of Paris in inherently negative terms and describes the city as a place of death and despair. In stark contrast, Malte nostalgically yearns for the community and vitality of the rural countryside and considers it to be a place of life. When discussing the ideal environment for an aspiring poet, Malte writes “but the poet I’m reading is a different one, one who doesn’t live in Paris, quite different. One who has a quiet house in the mountains. Who sounds like a bell in the clean air” (Rilke 25). Rather than view the metropolis of Paris as a melting pot of companionship and vibrancy, Malte only perceives a metaphoric corpse slowly decaying away. Various negative factors, such as pollution, corruption, isolation, relentless noise, and overwhelming crowds all add to this aura of death.

Throughout the novel, Malte frequently refers to the relationships he had with various members of his family and chronicles their eventual deaths. The deaths of all Malte’s immediate family, including his mother, the young Erik, his father, and his sister, only adds to the depressed isolation Malte experiences throughout the novel. As a result of this solitude, Malte is led to fervently search within himself to remember the lives of those who previously lived. Rilke also uses spirits and ghosts to reconfirm the theme of death, as evidenced by Malte’s captivation by the mysterious presence of Christine Brahe’s ghost and the specter of Malte’s sister Ingeborg. When describing the mesmerizing figure of Christine Brahe, Malte notes “and then Christine Brahe walked past, step by step, slowly like an invalid, through the indescribable silence penetrated only by a whimpering sound like that of an old dog” (Rilke 22). Despite not being openly spiritual, Rilke seems to indicate that some form of life after death does exist, even if only in the minds of others.

Despite his rabid fascination and obsession with the concept of death, Malte is hesitant and afraid to actually experience death firsthand. When at the hospital in order to undergo electric-shock treatment, Malte is disgusted by the overwhelming aura of death and decay, and as a result, Malte is compelled to abruptly flee the hospital. In addition to his experience at the hospital, Malte’s trauma regarding the death of the Chamberlain further serves as an example of Malte’s horror over the finality of death. When describing his instinctual fear of death, Malte states that “but since then I have learned to be afraid with

real fear, which only increases when the power of what has created it increases” (Rilke 96). Similar to Malte’s observant and reclusive personality in the physical world, Malte simply wants to be a spectator of death, not an actual participant.

As the novel progresses into the second section and the perspective of Malte begins to change, so too does his outlook towards death. Although Malte still feels a certain level of concern regarding the beyond, he eventually begins to accept the inevitability of death and embrace the liberation that subsequently followed. By acknowledging the unavoidable aspects of death, Malte is able to finally refocus his attention upon the notion of love and find his own sense of existence that has previously eluded him. When discussing the pure love of women and the complexity of life, Malte concludes that “The one who loves always surpasses her beloved because life is greater than fate” (Rilke 119).

Death is a universal concept that applies to every person and every region of the world. However, through *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rilke offers the unique opportunity to enter the mind of a “flaneur” as he analyzes the termination of life through a truly solitary perspective. Similar to the pursuit of inner peace or self-awareness, death can also be found within each ourselves. However, as demonstrated by the parable of the Prodigal Son at the end of the novel, the embracement of love is a powerful force that is capable of transcending all sins and negative qualities. Rather than dwell on the grim aspects of the city and his life, Malte grew to accept his fate regarding death and was therefore able to focus his attention on the qualities that truly give life meaning. By descending within himself and examining the world through his own unique perspective, Malte is able to find a form of contentment by demonstrating the lesson of how the concept of death does not need to be the final destination in one’s life, but rather the beginning of the realization towards the values that make life worthwhile.

Works Cited

Rilke, Rainer M. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Translated by Robert Vilain, Oxford University Press, 2016.