

CONTEMPLATING DEATH

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Throughout time people have been searching for answers regarding mysteries surrounding death. Death is the phenomena the people fear the most; it is also the one thing the people are most curious about. There are many religions and cultures that believe that death is only the beginning and that a whole new paradise awaits people in some sort of a 'spirit world'. Other societies believe that what people do in this life determines who or what the people will be in another life. Still there are those who believe that nothing spectacular occurs with death; that we just simply cease to exist. Sometimes, the mystery of death intrigues individuals, while its promise of peace draws others. John Donne in his holy sonnet *Death, Be Not Proud* attacks the conventional characterization of death as man's invincible conqueror believing in afterlife whereas Dylan Thomas in *Do Not Go Gentle into That Goodnight* ponders on the issue of death and urges his dying father to rage against death stating that it is the end of the light/life.

John Donne in *Death, Be Not Proud* issues a challenge to death. Personifying death, he states that it should not boast of its conquest of people nor take pride in their fear of it. The poet depicts death as a force that is supposed to be "mighty and dreadful" because it kills everybody, but he denies its omnipotence, pitying "poor" death and declaring that it will not kill him. The poet attempts to convince his audience not to be afraid of death, saying that people actually do not die forever.

In a series of paradoxes, the poet attacks the conventional characterization of death as man's invincible conqueror. Rather than being a fearful experience, death brings greater release and pleasure than rest and sleep, which

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people use to restore their energy. The poet states that death not only provides "Rest of bones" but also "soul's delivery," a release into a peaceful eternity. Moreover, death is not the tyrant that it imagines itself to be; rather, it is a slave to the arbitrary dictates of fate and chance and to the whims of impulsive monarchs and murderers. Death is associated only with the most destructive elements in life—poison, war, and sickness. Moreover, opium and other drugs can put a person to sleep as easily as and better than death does. Thus, as a result of its servility, weaknesses, and association with the worst human events, death should not swell with pride. The final two lines sum up the poet's defeat of vainglorious death: People may die, but they do not stay dead. They awaken from death as if from a short sleep into an eternity in which "death shall be no more." Death shall die then, but humans will live eternally. The poet, thus, has carried out an effective rhetorical attack against the invincibility of death and, at the same time, has declared his faith in an eternal afterlife's joys that shall transcend the horrors of earthly life.

Addressed to the poet's father, Dylan Thomas's *Do Not Go Gentle into That Goodnight* gives him advice about how he ought to die. The poem discusses various ways to approach death in old age. It advocates affirming life up until the last breath, rather than learning to accept death quietly. The poet tells his father to defy death declaring that the old age should "burn and rave" against dying. This message is contrary to the usual association of a peaceful dying with good character and a virtuous life.

The poet in the poem presents four different types of people—wise men, good men, wild men and grave men—with their different opinions about dying. The wise men are the philosophers; the good men are the moralists; the wild men are hedonists; the grave men are the poets. These different people say different things about death and how to die but they are similar regarding death in at least two ways. They all say one thing in theory but practically rage against death and also make best of life until they live. Thomas is telling his father not to believe what people say but to see what they do because all men have raged against death and they do not go gently into death. In the

final stanza, Thomas tells his father, "And, you, my father, there on the sad height". The poet tells his father to curse, to bless, or to do anything but not to remain silent in the face of death. He rather tells his father not to accept his death so gently, but to rave against it and live life to his best so far as he could.

Although Donne's and Thomas's poems discuss death and their opinions surrounding the concept, the tones infused within the work differ greatly. Instead of commonly portraying death as a welcome relief from life's tensions, Donne presents spiritual views on death. The poem implies that physical death is not the end rather it is the beginning of a perpetual life. Thomas on the other hand is concerned with physical aspect of death. Thomas primarily fixes his attention on the scene of dying and presents profoundly sentimental tone.

References:

Donne, John. "Death Be Not Proud". Elements of Literature. Ed. Robert Scholes, Nancy R Comley, Carl H Klaus and Michael Silverman. 4th ed. New Delhi: OUP, 2012.

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