DEATH ACCEPTANCE THEORY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE PSYCHOLOGICAL READINGS OF DEATH POEMS BY ROBERT FROST, WILLIAM BRYANT, AND EMILY DICKINSON

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ABSTRACT

Death remains the biggest threat as well as the greatest challenge to humanity. It is the single universal event that affects all of us in unrecognized ways. Because of the unique human capacity of meaning-making and social construction, death has evolved into a very complex and dynamic system, involving biological, psychological, spiritual, societal and cultural components (Kastenbaum, 96). Whatever meanings we attach to death, death is all around us, is has become part of our culture and we have all adapted ourselves to accepting it.

The different attitudes toward death have been reflected in American literature. Death in American literature is demonstrated in the writings of many famous authors. Whether it is the small poem “Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening” by the well-known Robert Frost or by the young mind of William Cullen Bryant in ”Thanatopsis,” or Emily Dickinson “I Couldn’t Stop for Death”, death seems to be the main topic in American Literature. The main topics of all these famous writings are ambiguous, open to interpretations, yet they all seem to end up with the same conclusion, death.

KEY WORDS: Robert Frost, William Bryant, Emily Dickinson, Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Day, Thanatopsis, I Couldn’t Stop for Death, Escape Acceptance, Approach Acceptance, Neutral Death Acceptance

INTRODUCTION

The concept of meaning making in life through death is one of the foundations of Existential psychology. Existential psychologists like Rollo May believe that individuals must accept the inevitability of their own deaths and the deaths of loved ones; otherwise, they cannot fully embrace or find true meaning in life. This theory tracks with research that indicates that the more purpose and meaning that individuals see in their lives, the less they fear death. In contrast, the denial of death leads to Existential anxiety, which can be a source of emotional troubles in daily life.

Moreover, in the last fifty years, the psychology of death has been dominated by research on death anxiety (Kastenbaum, 99 Neimeyer, 66) and terror management theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 47). There was only a scant literature on death acceptance. Ray and Najman were the first ones to develop a new scale to measure death acceptance, and found that it had a small but significant positive correction with two death anxiety scales (311). The discovery of the co-existence of death anxiety and death acceptance is important because it reveals a basic ambivalent and conflicted attitude towards death: It is never easy to resolve the issue of death anxiety regarding our personal demise. No matter how remote and vague, the prospect of death of self or a loved one will always be unsettling because it disrupts the flow of life. However, a well developed system of death acceptance can keep death anxiety at bay and prevent it from interfering with our daily functioning.

Elisabeth Kuber-Ross was largely responsible for making death a justifiable topic for research and medicine. Her stage-model of coping with death (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) has been an impact on the
understanding of the psychological reactions to death. She has identified some defense mechanisms (denial and bargaining), and negative emotional reactions (anger and depression) involved in coming to terms with the reality of death (55). Her sequential stage concept has been widely criticized. For example, Bonanno has recently found that in coping with sadness, most people can come to death acceptance without going through the previous stages; however, that does not mean the absence of inner struggles with the complex emotions involved in bereavement (120). Only direct research on death acceptance will reveal the pathways and mechanisms of coming to terms with death in a constructive way.

Psychologists, In addition to death fear and death avoidance, identified three distinct types of death acceptance: (1) Escape acceptance – choosing death as a better alternative to a painful existence, (2) Approach acceptance – accepting death as a gateway to a better afterlife, and (3) Neutral death acceptance – facing death rationally as an inevitable end of every life.

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Attitudes of Escape approach through committing suicide are shown in the short poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” by Robert Frost. “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is generally regarded as Frost's masterpiece (Galens, 39). He talks about the confusion and misery a man lives with when influenced by depression and death is the way out he needs. For whatever reason, he is depressed and his despair is about to push him over the edge and end his life. Clint Stevens thinks that the poem is “by no means the most psychologically rich poem Frost ever wrote, yet in its starkness and clarity we as readers only benefit (Online)”. Perhaps the first thing we notice is that the poem is an interior monologue. He is mentally and emotionally confused but it is his conscience that helps to remind him about the people who care for him and who would suffer if he died.

Frost uses an array of literary devices throughout his poem that beautifully describe and picture the scene that is viewed by an unknown speaker, the speaker contemplates suicide and the decision between life and death. The poem implies the attitude of escape acceptance which results from misery living conditions that the speaker feels unbearable. This temptation of death, even suicide, is literally symbolized by the woods that are filling up with snow on the darkest evening of the year. The speaker is powerfully drawn to these woods and wants to lie down and let the snow cover and bury him. The third quatrain, with its drowsy, dream-like line: "Of easy wind and downy flake (12),” opposes the horse’s instinctive urge for home with the man's subconscious desire for death in the dark, snowy woods. The speaker says, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep (13),” but he resists their morbid attraction.

Critics generally agree that its central theme is the speaker's dilemma in choosing between the allure of nature and the responsibilities of everyday life in human society. However, the ambiguity of the poem has lead to extensive critical debate. Many have pointed out that this “ambiguity” is in part what makes the poem great. Another standard interpretation is that the speaker is contemplating suicide—the woods, “lovely, dark, and deep, (11)” represents the allure of death as a means of escape from the routine duties of daily life. The first line establishes the tone of a person musing quietly to himself on the situation before him: "Whose woods these are I think I know (1)." He pauses here on "the darkest evening of the year (8),” the point in time poised between the day and the night, between consciousness and unconsciousness, between waking and sleeping, between life and oblivion. There is a slight lack of surety in the speaker saying to himself, "I think I know (1)”, thus again signifying the meeting ground between what he knows and what he does not. These antimonies, his lack of certainty, and the muted sense of passion provide the tension by which the poem operates. Some conclude that the
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speaker chooses, by the end of the poem, to resist the temptations of nature and return to the world of men. Others, however, argue that the speaker's repetition of the last line “And miles to go before I sleep, (16)” suggests an indecisiveness as to whether or not he will, in fact, “keep” the “promises (14)” by which he is obligated to return to society.

Here one may suggest that Escape acceptance is primarily based on the perception that life is so painful and miserable that death offers a welcome relief. The poem, physically agrees that suicide and assisted suicide are expressions of Escape acceptance. Cicirelli observed that when individuals experience intractable pain or loss of function, they want to end their own lives. In such cases, the terror of death seems less fearful than the terror of living (663).

William Cullen Bryant's famous poem "Thanatopsis" literally means a view of death. This poem is one of the classics about death as it offers a peaceful view of death, comfort for the living, and no matter what a person's religious beliefs, the poem is still applicable. The poem seems to adopt Approach acceptance attitude which implies belief a happy afterlife and reflects the positive outlook on death.

Even death is seemingly unpleasant end to everything doesn't have to be feared; though it is perfectly natural to feel it. Nature gave us this fear for reasons and though, yes, it is possible for one to deny the fears and feel void of them, most still feel themselves attached to them later on, comforted or not. One can live with this fear and still lead a happy life, in fact most do. For a purpose of merely comforting the reader about their fear of death and dying, Bryant accomplishes this and does well at it. Through his words, Bryant paints a picture of afterlife and companionship. That comfort, however, is very limited.

In "Thanatopsis", this fear is recognized and seemingly implied as being unnecessary. Bryant uses his understanding of death to first acknowledge the fears about it and then try to comfort the reader. This acknowledgement is apparent in the first three sections, from lines 1-30, and then Bryant slowly introduces the reader to the idea that death isn't something that has to be feared. It is at this point in which "Thanatopsis" becomes more of a hopeful speculation that death isn't what people generally expect and fear. He becomes romantic in his ideas that "thou shalt lie down with patriarchs of the infant world…all in one mighty sepulcher (34-35)". He presents ideas of afterlife and even has religious undertones, though there are obvious attempts to stay away from religion. Bryant's use of words and thoughts give the impression that death is magnificent and not merely an end to life.

Bryant assumes in "Thanatopsis" death is not an end to life but a "last sleep" where "the dead reign (55)". While, yes, it is comforting to take this and believe in it, it is also a speculation and nothing more. Meanwhile, the poem progresses into almost a fairy tale of sorts. This in Bryant's purpose of comforting the reader is almost expected but still it deters the reader from actuality. It seems that Bryant never considers that death might indeed be the end to life and nothing more, unlike the glamorous "departure" he describes. While this truth may be found to be unpleasant by some, it doesn't lead the reader to happiness on false terms.

"Thanatopsis" views death as part of the return to nature, like death is just another phase of life itself. "Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again, (22-23)". This quote explains that as a person has lived upon the Earth, the Earth will now live upon that person. The person will live on but in another way: "Surrendering up Thine individual being, shalt thou go to mix forever with the elements, (26-27)". What is meant in this quote is that the person goes on living in Nature although each part of the person as an individual is gone.

"Thanatopsis" also tells the reader that he/she will not go to death alone. Everyone who has ever died will already be there. Everyone who hasn't gone yet will be there eventually. Social class or age do not matter; we all share one thing, and that one thing is death. In that way, we are all equal and death becomes the great equalizer. The poem also provides
comfort for the living. "and what if thou withdraw in silence from the living, and no friend take note of thy departure? all that breathe will share thy destiny (59-60)". This statement provides comfort for the living as well. For those who seemingly have no one in life, they will not be alone in death. No person ever wants a friend or family member to suffer or to be alone, and Bryant tells us that no person will ever be alone. It is much easier to let someone go in this case.

The real beauty of the poem is that it provides comfort to a person no matter what his/her religious beliefs are. If the reader is an agnostic or atheist, the poem views death as just all part of the cycle of nature, we return to nature. If the reader is a Christian or Muslim, the poem becomes a split between body and soul. The body returns to nature, and there is no mention of the soul or spirit. The spirit can be seen as going anywhere because there is no mention of it. So this poem is absolutely able to translated to Islam or Christianity or atheism. Therefore the poem is in sync with many different religions.

Here, Approach acceptance is rooted in religious/spiritual beliefs in a desirable afterlife. For those who embrace such beliefs, afterlife is more than symbolic immortality, because it typically associates with theistic religious faith or belief in a transcendental reality. Approach acceptance is based on the social construction of life beyond the grave, thus, offering hope and comfort to the dying as well as the bereaved. More specifically, Harding, Flannelly, Weaver, and Costa reported that scales that measure belief in God's existence and belief in the afterlife were both negatively correlated with death anxiety but positively correlated with death acceptance (253-261).

The subject of death, including her own death, occurs throughout Emily Dickinson’s poems and letters. In regard to Emily Dickinson’s poem, “Because I Could Not Stop for Death,” Death Acceptance attitude is reflected in Emily Dickinson’s “Because I Couldn’t stop for Death”, the poem carries the Neutral Acceptance attitude. The items which loaded on the Neutral Acceptance subscale were split across two factors, Death Avoidance and Death Acceptance. This seems to suggest that the Neutral Acceptance subscale may measure different pathways to death acceptance without believing in an afterlife.

Critic Eunice Glenn says: “In the first two lines death, personified as a carriage driver, stops for one who could not stop for him. The word ‘kindly’ is particularly meaningful, for it instantly characterizes death. This comes with surprise, too, since death is more often considered grim and terrible (Online)”. Critic Charles R. Anderson says, “Death, usually rude, sudden, and impersonal, has been transformed into a kindly and leisurely gentleman (Online)”. Both critics seem to agree on the significance of the word “kindly” in the first two lines of the poem. “Because I could not stop for death— / He kindly stopped for me—” (1-2). They take the word “kindly” for its most common definitions—agreeable, pleasant, benevolent, etc. With further research, however, alternative, as well as more enlightening, definitions become available. The Oxford English Dictionary defines kindly as: “In accordance with nature; naturally; by natural disposition; characteristically” and “In the way suitable or appropriate to the nature of the thing; properly, fittingly” (“Kindly”). These definitions add new insights to the poem. In the superficial sense, death seemingly performed a charitable act by stopping for the speaker; in application of these less common definitions, however, death stopping for the speaker was necessary and proper. It was following after the natural course of things. Rather than merely suggesting the death was a charming “courteous carriage driver”, the speaker implies that death was obligated to stop for her; she is unable to stop for him.

It is interesting to note that the speaker says she “couldn’t” stop for death, rather than she “wouldn’t” stop. Most critics, like Charles Anderson, suggest that the speaker is simply “Too occupied with life herself to stop, like all busy mortals” (Anderson, online). Critic Patricia Engle, on the other hand, looks further and asks, “What does the speaker—or
anyone—stop doing for Death?” Answering her own question, Engle says: “We stop living.” In order to illustrate her point, she goes on to say, in reference to the speaker of the poem, “She realizes that she cannot recognize Death’s power over her. Once she reckons with that eternal or divine bent within her, Death stops; that is, Death ceases to be what Death is—an end” (74). Given deeper analysis of the poem as a whole, this interpretation appears to be the most accurate. Death is not the final stopping point for our speaker. The carriage only “paused” at the grave (17). “The Horses’ Heads / Were toward Eternity—” (23-24). The poem suggests that death was not meant to be an end—human existence will go on for eternity. This accounts for the third, often overlooked, passenger in the carriage—“Immortality” (4). Mortals don’t stop for death—death stops for them. Death gives way to immortality, and thus, stops being an end. Even if she had wanted to, the speaker could not have stopped for Death. The grave is merely a brief pause on the journey toward Eternity.

Dickinson had a definite purpose when she chose to personify death as a carriage driver. According to the Handbook of Literary Terms, “Personification allows an author to dramatize the nonhuman world in human terms” (Kennedy, 112). By endowing death with human characteristics, it becomes less frightening to the speaker. Death is now in terms which she understands. Seeing as “the problem of mortality is one of mindset” (Engle 74), making death human helps the speaker to get past that problem. It is much easier for the speaker to believe she can overcome the grave when she sees death as an amiable carriage driver, conducting her into eternity, rather than an unwanted fate which would eliminate her existence. Because the speaker is destined to become an immortal being, Death, in the natural and proper way, gives up his claim upon her. Death stops being an end, and becomes, rather, the means of conducting mortals into eternity.

Frost, Brayant, and Dickinson show the same cognitive capacity that terrorizes us about the prospect of death can also rescue us from this terror. Our capacity for meaning seeking and meaning-making can discover something so beautiful and powerful that it expels all fears.

REFERENCES


