

Modern Manifestations of Death in Two Literary Works

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ABSTRACT

This paper relates to the concept of death as presented in two works of literature. The major theme in both works is death but the perspective is different, if not contradictory. James Cary's Red Letter Day presents the innocent child's perception of death as something mysterious and apprehensive while in Tuesdays with Morrie, death appears to be a dynamic power, demonstrating how the old professor gives his best to humanity. The paper will discuss the religious aspect of death and people's fear of death, its causes and results on people's life.

Keywords: death; motivation; spirituality; after life; monotheistic religions

INTRODUCTION

Death has been a mysterious fearful phenomenon that stimulates man's imagination since the beginning of life. Literature, as a reflection of man's thoughts, fears, and expectations, has discussed the idea of death. Writers and novelists have written volumes about the pain of losing a loved one, what death is, and what stands behind it. Thus, the idea of death has occupied man's intellect and that shows the importance of understanding this concept to humanity. Therefore, this paper's major theme is the idea of death as it manifests in two modern literary works: James Cary's *Red Letter Day* (1965) and Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* (1997). The two works discuss the meaning of death and the force that stands behind it but they approach the idea of death differently as the reader will see in the analysis of the two works.

THE CONCEPT OF DEATH

Among the most frequently treated subjects in literature, death as a theme, symbol, or plot device exists as one of the outstanding defining elements in the writings of modern poets, dramatists, and novelists. Intertwined with the origin of literature itself, human perception of death has provided for centuries the impetus for reflection on the causes, meaning, and nature of existence. Moreover, while treatments of death are as varied as the authors who write them, scholars have found apparent in modern texts, whether for the stage, in verse, or in prose fiction, certain clearly defined approaches to this topic of nearly universal interest.

. . . And our little life
is rounded with a sleep.
The Tempest

It can be comprehended that "sleep" here means "death", the last stage in man's life which ultimately encircles the sequence of man's journey on earth. According to the Oxford dictionary, death is "the permanent end or destruction of something," and Ira Byock (2002) defines it as:

Phenomenologically, death is nonbeing. The essential nature of life entails activity, purpose, and making order from disorder. Death is the antithesis of life. Nonlife is inactive, and despite its stillness, death is chaos. Life generates its own meaning. In contrast, on its face death appears devoid of meaning and value. (279)

Besides, according to the Monotheistic faith, it is the cessation of the connection between the person's mind and body. Death takes place when the subtle consciousness leaves the body to go to the next life (Rastogi <http://www.slate.com/id/2204242>).

However, the notion of the word "death" is terrifying - whenever we hear it uttered, we shrink from it although we all know that death is a natural part of the human cycle. Most people, consciously, avoid the subject of death – it is a taboo – although an inquiry of this nature is familiar to philosophers and theologians. However, the ever present fact of mortality constantly threatens to wake us from the dream of life. When sudden death or terminal illness strikes our circle of family or friends, the foundation of our world is shaken. From the moment an individual is diagnosed with an incurable illness, death becomes the alarm that will not stop ringing. As Ira Byock (2002) asserts:

The intrusion of death forces us to look at the things we want most to avoid. Hitherto philosophical issues that seemed abstract and avoidable acquire concrete relevance and immediacy. Existential concepts such as "aloneness" of each individual in the universe become all too real when faced with the approaching and inevitable loss of everyone we know and love. (280)

Although intellectually people are aware that one day they will die, they live their lives as if they were going to be in this world forever. As a result, the things of this world – such as material possession, reputation, popularity, and the pleasures of the senses – become dominant, so people devote almost all of their time and energy to obtain them and engage in many negative actions for the sake of the attainment of worldly gains. People are so preoccupied with the concerns of this life that they become more and more apprehensive of it all being ended by death. That means people's main concern is luxury, earthly enjoyments, pleasures of food and youthful dreams, competitions to obtain more things that enrich their lives like wealth, position and prestige. And when death actually arrives, they realize that by having ignored death all their lives, they are now completely unprepared to accept it as a natural inevitable end.

THE BUDDHIST IDEA OF DEATH

In some religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, death is a transition to another state of being. In such beliefs, death is apprehended because of the fear of the endless process of rebirth (What Is Death www.death-and-dying.org/what-is-death.htm). Monotheistic religions also tell us that the soul of a person, who dies, flees to another sphere, leaving the body behind it. Hence, the soul of man is immortal and would begin another life at a different place. Thus in reflecting on death, one generally mixes up the idea of life with it, and accordingly, one makes of death a horrible monster of which one feels afraid. While thinking of a dead man, a person begins to think how he himself would feel in a similar situation; and that thought gives rise to abject dread in his mind.

Contrastively, religion's influence on people makes them defy death with courage because religion teaches people that death does not mean the end of life but the beginning of a new life. The influence of religion also makes people think that this life is not of too great a

value, but the modern man, having very little religious faith, shrinks from death. William Hazlitt ((2002) explains that as:

the implicit belief in a future life, which rendered this (life) of less value, and embodied something beyond it to the imagination; so that the rough soldier . . . could afford to throw away the present venture, and take a leap into the arms of futurity, which the modern sceptic shrinks back from with all his boasted reason and vain philosophy. (38)

“Death”, in spite of its spiritual and religious interpretation, is a socially constructed idea. The fears and orientations people have towards it are not instinctive, but rather are learned from such public symbols as the language, arts and funerary rituals of their culture. All cultures have a coherent mortality thesis whose explanations of death are so thoroughly ingrained that they are believed to be right by its members.

Although death is fearful, people are aware of it in all their life aspects, no matter how they try to avoid it as Victor Cicirelli (1998) pinpoints:

One of humanity’s most distinguishing characteristics is the capacity to grasp the concept of objective death, to understand the limitations it places on the duration of life, and to react emotionally to it. (713)

Therefore, this paper’s concern is the death concept as presented in two works of literature. The major theme in both works is death but the perspective is different, if not contradictory. James Cary’s *Red Letter Day* (1965) presents an innocent child’s perspective of death as something mysterious and frightening while in Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays with Morrie* (1997), death appears to be a dynamic power demonstrating the way in which the old professor gives his best to humanity. This awareness of death and its impact on people’s life and thought is reflected in literature which mirrors life as we will see exemplified in the two works mentioned previously.

The concept of Death has been discussed in many previous literary works, and it will always be discussed because this phenomenon triggers different reactions in man’s psyche. The religious concept of Death as a gate to another mortal life, and as a means for the union of two lives is clear in Catherine and Heathcliff’s miserable love in Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*. The passionate yearning of Catherine and Heathcliff for each other, their desperate striving for union and their intransigence in pursuing that quest suggest that this union can only be achieved through transcendence to another life. It is the religious belief that there is another life more fulfilling beyond our earthly life and there the two lovers can unite. That belief is what motivates Catherine to exclaim, "surely you and everybody have a notion that there is, or should be, an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here?" (p. 70). Catherine’s awareness of the misery of the earthly life comes through her religious idea of death, and that it is not an end but a beginning for a new life that enables her to have a whole and complete life with Heathcliff.

Another work where the concept of death takes a different perspective from that of Bronte’s is Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim*. Death here is a spiritually transcendent phase. The hero, Jim, goes through many stages of errors destroying himself and others as well. Death becomes his only way of salvation; death fertilizes the spirit, so here death becomes a spiritually fertilizing experience, enlightening the soul in a time of confusion.

ANALYSIS

Both works mentioned previously are examples of the literary handling of the concept of Death that differs greatly from the works discussed in this paper, where the concept of death in *The Red Letter* is frightening and mysterious. In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, death is presented as a positive force. On the one hand, *The Red Letter Day* tells the story of an old man who visits his nephew's family regularly. As an old man living at the elderly home, the visit is very important to him as his nephew is his sole living relative. He is welcomed on the grounds of his coveted wealth, but of course such a desire is not meant to be disclosed. It lurks at the back of the nephew's mind and surfaces in the question asked by the nephew's child, who unambiguously uncovers the hidden motive by asking the old man if he is going to die.

TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE

On the other hand, the book *Tuesdays with Morrie* represents a different perspective of death from *The Red Letter Day*. The author of the book, Albom, who used to be one of professor Morrie's students, reflects Death as a positive force. Years after Albom's graduation from Brandeis, Morrie is forced to stop dancing, his favorite hobby, because he has been diagnosed with ALS, a debilitating disease that leaves his soul perfectly awake but imprisoned inside a limp body. One night, Albom is flipping the television's channels and recognizes Morrie's voice. Morrie is being featured on the television program "Nightline" in the first of series of interviews with Ted Koppel. Shortly, Albom contacts his previous professor and travels to his city. Every Tuesday, they meet and Albom listens to Morrie's lessons on "the meaning of life". Each week he brings Morrie food to eat, though as Morrie's condition worsens, he is no longer able to enjoy solid food. In his first interview with Koppel, Morrie admits that the thing he dreads most about his worsening condition is that someday, he will not be able to wipe himself after using the bathroom (p. 49). Eventually this fear comes true. The reader follows, step by step, Morrie's demolishing life but enjoys at the same time, his lessons and philosophy and brave confrontation of death.

Morrie takes a positive attitude towards aging and eventually death; it is clear in his reply to the question if he yearns for youth:

Aging is not just decay, you know. It's growth. It's more than the negative that you're going to die, it's also the positive that you *understand* you're going to die, and that you live a better life because of it (118)

His answer corresponds to Hazlitt's advice on how to accept death:

Perhaps the best cure for the fear of death is to reflect that life has a beginning as well as an end. There was a time when we were not; this gives us no concern—why, then, should it trouble us that a time will come when we shall cease to be? (31).

Hazlitt states here the predominant feeling of human kind, death. Common sense suggests that a sane man should be aware that his life has a beginning; therefore it has to have an end so there should not be fear of death. One should not regret mortality. As a matter of fact, those who fear death do so for religious reasons or for materialist gains.

Monotheistic religions tell people that the soul is immortal and would begin another life at a different place, either a good or bad one. The Quranic verses say: "But do not think of those that have been slain in God's cause as dead. Nay, they are happily alive with their

sustainer have they their sustenance.” (169 Al-Imran) and “Their requital shall be rejected by God, and by the angels, and by all {righteous} men. {87 Al-Imran} In this state shall they abide {and} neither will their suffering be lightened, nor will they be granted respite” (87-88 Al-Imran). Religion does not assure us of a happy life: it promises punishment as well as reward, and for that reason a person is not sure where he will end. Therefore, death is viewed as a horrible monster of which all are terrified. As we think of a dead person, we begin to think how we ourselves would feel in a similar situation and that thought gives rise to fear in our minds. The influence of religion also makes people defy death with courage because religion preaches to people that death is not the end of life but the beginning of immortality. This awareness of being just passers-by in this life scares people and makes them reflect what will come after death. Immortality can be to the advantage or disadvantage of the dead according to their earthly deeds. It is also scary in the sense that man will be cut off from all his friends and family, i.e. in a state of social isolation. Man feels very disturbed about what might happen after his death. He wants to prolong his present life.

Another psychological cause of fear of death is the act of departure of the soul from the body where one believes that this separation cannot occur except through killing or murder as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1970) states:

Death is never possible in regard to our selves. It is unconceivable for our unconscious to imagine an actual ending of our own life here on earth, and if this life of ours has to end, the ending is always attributed to a malicious intervention from the outside by some one else. In simple terms, our conscious mind can only be killed Therefore death in itself is associated with bad act, frightening happening (2).

Hence, fear of death has many motivations in man’s consciousness as Victor Cicirelli (1998) says: “death anxiety or death fear is not a single emotion but a complex set of fears” (714). Therefore, people are afraid and unwilling to give up their lives with all their advantages and disadvantages and move to the realm of the unknown. Even pious people, who believe that in the after life they will have their reward for their earthly good deeds, are afraid of death.

Strangely enough, the fear of death reflects a dreadful attitude towards the dead person; the dead person becomes unwanted and terrified although he/she was pampered, cared for, and touched shortly before death took place. In ancient times, we are told that the apprehensions went to an extreme as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross mentions: “The ancient Hebrews regarded the body of a dead person as something unclean and not to be touched” (4).

However, fear of death has been the most ordinary reaction of human kind towards the unwanted visitor, but death as it appears in *Tuesdays with Morrie* is different. Death appears in this book a motivation not to depression or religious anxiety; rather it is a motivation to improvement of humanity. It is a continuation of personal growth as Morrie explains to Algom in his account of the difference between youth and aging which ends naturally in death:

Weren’t you *ever* afraid to grow old, I asked? “Algom, I *embrace* aging.”
Embrace it? “It’s very simple. As you grow, you learn more. If you stayed at twenty-two, you’d always be as Ignorant as you were twenty-two. (118)

This belief in personal growth goes in hand with what Byock (2002) mentions: “Rich empiric evidence from the biographic and medical literature has established that an individual’s confrontation with death can serve as a stimulus for personal growth” (281). Such growth would allow the dying person to adjust to living with the knowledge of death’s approach as the reader notices in Morrie’s case:

Morrie continued, “most of us all walk around as if we’re sleepwalking. We really don’t experience the world fully, because we’re half-asleep doing things we automatically think we have to do.” And facing death changes all that? “Oh, yes. You strip away all that stuff and you focus on the essentials. When you realize you are going to die, you see everything much differently. He sighed. “Learn how to die, and you learn how to live.” (83)

However, death pushes people to feel that they would be leaving certain important duties unfinished, and that it will shatter the strong ties that bond them with this world, and with those whom they love as one notices in Morrie’s case. He clings to life throughout his fourteen Tuesdays with Albom. He reveals that love is the essence of every person, and every relationship, and to live without it is to live with nothing. The importance of love in his life is clear as he nears his final days, for without the care of those he loves, and who love him, he would perish: . “I may be dying, but am surrounded by loving, caring souls. How many people can say that?” (36). Morrie clings to life not because he is afraid of dying or because he fears what will become of him in the afterlife, but because his greatest dying wish is to share his story with Albom so that he may share it with the world and learn from it.

Moreover, the approach of death fuels a lurking desire to leave something behind, something good by which he can be remembered. Morrie feels he has a mission to fulfill towards his fellow men. Thus he has a genuine desire to benefit mankind. He agrees to shoot the series television interviews where million of people are watching him communicating his experiences. This wish to leave a virtuous memory behind after his death is what Hazlitt explains:

A great man’s memory may, at the common rate, survive him half a year. His heirs and successors take his title, his power, and his wealth—all that made him considerable or courted by others Posterity are not by any means so disinterested as they are supposed to be. They give their gratitude and admiration only in return for benefits conferred. They cherish the memory of those whom they are indebted for instruction and delight; and they cherish it just in proportion to the instruction and delight they are conscious they receive. (37)

When a person faces death experience, he focuses more on the direct connectedness to oneself and others in the search for existential meaning. Essentially, it is the ultimate search for the meaning of life and acceptance of the life situation and, in turn, acceptance of death.

The meaning of death and life are interdependent. Life gains its meaning from the fact of death, how one lives in terms of accomplishments and failures, struggles and challenges, changes in the circumstances of life, and the cumulative effect of many diverse experiences influences one’s personal meaning of death. That is, when death becomes a motivation for Morrie’s last achievement, as we have seen in the book, he cannot leave the world before his enlightening mission is made known to the world via his devoted student Albom, who keeps visiting him every Tuesday giving him love and support until the professor dies.

RED LETTER DAY

In contrast to the concept of death as a strong positive and motivating force, we experience a different perspective in the attitudes of the uncle’s relatives in the short story *Red Letter Day*. The main concern here is with the inheritance. In this story, materialism takes over. Money becomes the most powerful force behind man’s action and attitude. Human feelings and sympathy are not a priority any more. Death means the end of the person with all its cold association and gloomy feeling.

Death here is an abstract mysterious idea to the child and at the same time a scary distasteful subject to the adults. In this story death appears to be the end of life and banishment of the earthly cozy world. It is not a motivation as it is in the previously discussed work. The child asks her question innocently:

Are you very old?
He looked at her . . . and echoed placidly: 'very old.'
'Very, very old?'
'Very, very old.'
'You're going to die soon.' (175)

She is unaware of the dreadful connotation of “death” although she is aware that it is something undesirable. The spirit of childhood is enough to keep away from her mind the precise meaning of death; she has not experienced it or witnessed it. She is so far from the thought of death to the extent that it does not trouble her mind. The child, so full of animation, activity, zest, and free spirit makes death an abstract obscure concept. V. Cicirelli (1998) observes the children’s ability to grasp the meaning of death and states that: “Most children have a mature grasp on the objective meanings of death by late childhood and some notions regarding noncorporeal continuation” (715-716). But this mature grasp of the meaning of death comes late at the end of the story. The child reads that the uncle is expected to die in two years, so does the mother’s almanac prediction. This is most likely written in a context of relief as he seems to be a burden on the couple’s life. His death will bring them wealth and they are keen not to provoke him as the husband advises his wife: “It would be idiotic to offend him” (173). The old man chooses to decline the hint of his death and protects himself from the overwhelming reality of death through the mechanism of denial. As Gibson (2007) rightly observes:

the first stage of the coping process is denial. This does apply to how individuals cope with death In psych-logical terms, denial acts as a defense mechanism to protect individuals as they cope with the imminent event (280).

However, most cultures tend to avoid or ignore the seriousness of death and that is clear in the couple’s reaction towards the child’s hint to the old man’s approaching end. Death in this story contrasts radically with the concept of death in *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Here death is avoided, though desired, by those relatives who await the inheritance, unlike the loving people around Morrie who do not avoid the idea of the approaching end and show their love and care.

The old man does not have a name in the story; he is just the “uncle”, this namelessness emphasises his insignificance to his surrounding world in the social and kinship context. Death in this work has two meanings; to the couple it is a relief from the old man’s hateful visits which put constraints on their youthful lives. To the old man, it is the fearful end and that explains the old man overlooking the child’s hint of death. The uncle is afraid of the death process and he might have acknowledged it in a better way if he had been surrounded by loving relations who would support him. Thus, a person with social support seems to cope with death in a better way than another whose existence is regarded as a burden to those around. As Gibson (2007) states:

Although the existence of social support as a coping resource is important, research indicates that the quality and natures of individuals’ relationship is more important than their mere existence. Specifically, relationships that are mutual and intimate can facilitate self-disclosure, coping strategies, emotional resiliency, and additional social support. (281)

This extract emphasises the importance of social support especially during the time of vital illness or old age melancholy.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, death is important to the meaning and value of human life as experienced by individuals and societies. It does not only give meaning to life but it also provides the backdrop against which life is lived. Fundamental responsibilities of human beings towards one another are defined by the need to respond to the facts of illness and death and contribute to the meaning and value of individual and communal life. The importance of familial love and support to a dying person is evidenced in the medical literature. There is evidence adduced from hospice care-providers that dying persons who feel effectively supported by their families and friends encounter a more peaceful death than others.

As we have seen in the works discussed, "Death" generates different and sometimes contradictory perspectives. At times, it is feared and this fear leads to pretension of ignoring its existence; at other times, it is accepted as a dynamic force that will bring the best of the human being. Death concept to most of us is a horrible, grim reality but this fear is irrational and we should fight it and instead of ignoring the thought of it, we should work our best to leave something memorable behind us as Morrie did. Morrie was helped by the love of his family and the people around him, and that shows the importance of familial love and support of his friends to a dying person.

Death in literature is a varied thing, just as is death in society. Death is also an inescapable destiny for each of us as individuals and, for this reason, has always permeated our thoughts at all levels, from the immediate sense of devastation that personal bereavement gives us to the ways in which we manage the fact of death by pushing it onto the surface.

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