

The Concept of Death in the Houseman's "To an Athlete Dying Young" and Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth"

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to compare the theme of death in two poems, namely A E Housman's *To an Athlete Dying Young*, which portrays the comfort of death through its simple style and views death as celebrating the release from the difficulties of life, and Wilfred Owen's *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, which presents the primary theme of war as horror and pity and focuses on the horror of young men's death. Anthem specifies happiness and joy attached to *Doom youth* and expresses great sorrow and that war brings suffering. *To an athlete dying young* portrays death as glory and eternal admiration. In comparison, *Anthem for the Doomed Youth* portrays death as horrible, not glorious. There are contrasting views of death as different philosophers have come up with different points of view in this respect. On this basis, the current essay considers the philosophical understanding of death by comparing the different poets' views toward the concept.

Keywords: Death; To an athlete dying young; Anthem for Doomed Youth; death horror, the glory of death.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background Information

Housman published *To an Athlete Dying Young* in a collection entitled *A Shropshire Lad* in 1886. The poem portrays the death of a young athlete who won a race and got the respect of his townsmen. It offers an unusual way of accepting and viewing death. On the other hand, *Anthem for Doomed Youth* is one of the best-known War World I (WWI) poems by Wilfred Owen. It was written in 1917 in Edinburgh. In this poem, Owen describes the fate of English soldiers who died in WWI, questions about the type of funeral these dead young soldiers would receive, and ironically compares the horror of war and the glory of death for a country where lives were taken for granted and unappreciated. The poem is dominated by sadness and the loss of feeling through certain techniques such as irony, simile, and imagery to highlight the expression of Owen's feelings throughout the poem. Added to that, Owen shows that the glory portrayed by those soldiers is an illusion. He compares the soldiers to "cattle" dying in their herds, with no ceremony and little comfort in their final moments (Owen, 2015).

1.2 Methodological Approach

A study conducted by McEvoy, MacHale, and Tierney (2012) outlined the concept of death and perceptions of bereavement among adults with intellectual disabilities. Bereavement is potentially the disruption and emotional distress period. However, a poor understanding of the death concept may worsen this distress among people with intellectual disabilities. The study aimed at investigating the understanding that people with an intellectual disability toward the concept of death. In the same case, it also wanted to acquire adequate information on their explanation of death and how they see life's death without the deceased present. McEvoy et al.'s study further outline that people with intellectual disability can only partially understand the concept of death, which increases their vulnerability to factually incorrect thoughts, and that religious and spiritual themes are also prominent for making sense of death. Hence, it brings the need to describe individuals with intellectual disabilities on death as a biological process. The sociological approach is the most significant method of analyzing the two poems concerning the concept of death. It is a critical aspect that perfectly expresses the relationship between

individuals and society with the law. Durkheim's sociology of death states, "When someone dies, the group to which he belongs feels lessened and, to react against this loss, it assembles. Collective sentiments are renewed, leading men to seek one another and assemble together." The analysis follows this approach and aims at acquiring an adequate understanding of the sociology of death works effectively in the poems.

Wiese et al. (2015) also conducted a study to describe why people with intellectual disabilities do not know about dying and death. The study's findings show that these people cannot understand and learn the idea of death. The phenomenon of death becomes known to intellectually disabled people, most often when they suffer from a life-limiting illness (Wiese et al., 2015). Death is the greatest challenge and an abstract idea, even for people with no intellectual disability. Hence, we all need reasonable mastery to engage with abstract concepts. This may be one of the reasons why death is understood as a different concept by different people. Death cannot be denied, but many individuals struggle with understanding and accepting the idea of dying before their life-limiting illnesses and incidents.

Green (2012) argued about the fear of oblivion, which has also been pointed out by (Housman, 2014) in the poem *To an Athlete Dying Young*. There is a prevailing agreement on the significance of the soul in the now and hereafter, even though it has not been the source of open public conversation. The concept of now and hereafter undoubtedly has great significance. Human beings want to be remembered for even little achievements that will live on after they die. We all do not want to be forgotten, which is why the death of great leaders and achievers is glorious.

Analysis of "To an Athlete Dying Young" by A. E. Housman and "Anthem for Doomed Youth" by Wilfred Owen

2. Housman's Concept of Death

In his poem *To an Athlete Dying Young*, Housman presents death as a way to celebrate a youth lived to its fullest. The poem holds a tension inherent in many of Housman's poems between the concept of worldly life being a place where vibrancy

exists, especially in youth, and the idea that it might be better to die at the peak of life rather than grow old and see one's achievements or honors not being remembered. This means that Housman supports death, where he views it as a perfect element when it comes before one's legacy fades. He indicates that people should die when they are young and when society appreciates their achievements. According to his view, this covers one's legacy and ensures he leaves perfect remembrance even in their graves. He views death as a critical element that people should embrace and support through celebrations since it creates ultimate prominence. Housman wants people to understand that if someone dies early, they will not see their shame after their greatness days (Maron, 2015). According to his view, death should come when one is young since it ensures that one remain

Death elicits significant emotions among many people globally following its impacts. This contributes significantly to Housman's choice to address it as a significant theme in, *To an Athlete, Dying Young*. He creates significant interpretations toward death, where he shows his views in a diverse view. First, he presents death as a critical element of celebrating a young person's life that they lived to the fullest. This shows that Housman considers death as a critical element to celebrate among people. They need to ensure that they consider the achievements the deceased made in their lives and celebrate. The speaker explains how people carried the athlete and celebrated his victory. They also carried him to his burial, which shows that they celebrated his achievements and victory in different environments. This indicates that the speaker views death with significant irony, where he shows a critical event that requires celebration.

Housman aims to show that many people take death negatively, where they fail to celebrate people of their life achievements. In the same case, the speaker congratulates the athlete following his death. This shows that Housman uses the speaker to indicate that death does not show the termination of different events. It is also not something to regret, especially when a person has achieved various

things. People in society, young and old, appreciated the athlete after he had won a race and brought him home shoulder-high. This time, they have to take him home shoulders-high, with all roads runners coming for his last day.

*Today, the road all runners come,
Shoulder-high we bring you home,
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsmen of a stiller town*

To an Athlete, Dying Young reflects the concept that discusses the fear of forgetting. The fear of being lost and unconscious can shape the concept of life and the way we perceive death. This poem also describes the notion of dying with a meaning and an aim of being remembered for the rest of life (Ibid). He further discusses the similar concept of glorious death as unforgettable. The sudden death after the victory of the young athlete will remind people of him now and hereafter. Stanza four of the poem says;

*"Eyes the shady night has shut
Cannot see the record cut,
And silence sounds no worse than cheers
After earth has stopped the ears"*

This means that even the silence of his death is like cheer because people will never forget his victory and his sudden silent death. The athlete will remain alive even though his biological process has terminated. This concept also reflects the great philosopher Plato's idea of death, who argued that death does not occur when bodily functions cease (Davis, 1980). It is similarly supported by *Aristotle*, who also stated that death is not bad. As such, the deeper the philosophical understanding developed among human beings, the lesser the fear of death will be (Gill, 1998). This indicates that the athlete's records will remain to represent him despite his demise. It is a significant indication that death does not mean everything is gone. It always depends on what one has left behind for people to celebrate. Houseman creates a significant view to people that they need to understand death. They should know to live their lives to the fullest to ensure they have ultimate achievements that people can celebrate. This creates memories for them, which means they will not be forgotten among the living. Every

individual should analyze the ultimate things they should maintain to prevent complaints after death.

3. Owen's Anthem for Doomed Youth Concept of Death

Anthem for Doomed Youth is a grief expression toward the deaths of young soldiers in the war. On highlighting the reality of life in the trenches, Owen shows such a death as bleak and harsh. He indicates that death is not something that people should enjoy following its cruelty. Many young people die in the war after being trapped, where they are unable to escape or fight back to save their lives. The poem's first line says, "What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?" This signifies that the soldiers are being killed as animals, which nobody may wish to face. This indicates that it's not their idea to die like animals, where they face the brutality of guns and rifles in enclosed places where they cannot save themselves. The poem uses sound effects and imagery to emphasize gun and shellfire noises and laments of people left behind after the deaths of the soldiers (Martin, 2015). In this case, Owen has a different view toward death, where his arguments indicate that nobody likes death. He indicates that it's nobody's an exciting idea to die in war; thus, nobody should approach the situation with excitement. The question in the poem's first line undercuts the soldier's patriotic ideas of dying for their country. They may believe it is heroic to die in war representing their country, but Owen does not like the idea. His view toward death is significant and indicates that death cuts short people's lives and their focus on various achievements.

Death in war is seen as something horrible and sad rather than glorious. Owen was a soldier and a war poet. As such, his perspective and opinion about death are shaped because of the different situations he has been through. War is evil, and soldiers are prepared for war because war does not bring any good. However, death for soldiers is something that they were already prepared for. Wiese et al. (2015) state that death as an abstract idea is the greatest challenge, even for people with no intellectual disability. Hence, we all need reasonable mastery to engage with abstract concepts. This may be one of the reasons that death

is understood as a different concept for different people, i.e., not only people with intellectual disabilities but also those with intellect and understanding. Owen writes:

“What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

– *Only the monstrous anger of the guns.*

Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons

As described by Owen (2015), death runs opposite to the idea of death described by the great philosophers *Aristotle* and *Plato*. Wiese et al. (2015) viewed death as something not bad and not just the mere termination of bodily functions. McEvoy et al.’s (2012) view of the death and grief perception as distressing and emotionally disrupting is in line with Owen’s view. However, death is unavoidable and is an ultimate reality that has to occur one day or another. Since we all have to die, it is more likely to prefer dying with the aim of “now” and “hereafter.” Hence, the analysis supports the essay’s main argument, primarily derived from the concepts presented by the great philosophers *Aristotle* and *Plato*. Owen wants to bring a significant view to people concerning war and death. They should understand that war does not only mean fighting for a country and attaining victory. However, it brings a different perspective to the soldiers or the people on the war front. They look at humanity and death eye to eye and experience reality, suffering, and agony, which they may not be able to control. His view shows that death is not the best element soldiers should be proud of, as they believe that dying for their country is patriotic.

Wilfred Owen also wants to show that a soldier dying in the war does not show heroism. However, he expresses that the soldiers are just individuals who die senselessly and helplessly. In this case, he views death as futile and destructive toward people, where nobody should celebrate it at any cost. He aims to create a different perspective among the audience to understand that death brings significant suffering to many people. Family members, friends, and other soldiers remain in significant worry following the losses they undergo. This shows they don’t need to celebrate death since they lost their members. Many young

men die on the battlefield, bringing their families sadness and sorrow. The losses create a different atmosphere, where people experience psychological torture thinking about their family members.

In this case, Owen wants people to understand that they should not celebrate the deaths of the soldiers thinking that they are heroes. The emotional aspect of death follows people individually and goes on for a long time. This means that private mourning following a death is progressive. He shows that people should not underestimate the fact that death brings loss and grief. In the same case, his view is that death is not good as many people think and appreciate its presence. In stanza two, line two, the speaker says, “not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.” He means that when we think about death, we must discuss the suffering and pain that follow. He views death as an oppressor following the agony it initiates for the people left behind. In the same case, the soldiers die in a situation where they cannot escape the pain, which shows that they face significant challenges. Therefore, this explains his view that people should not glorify death since nobody wants to die.

4. Conclusion

Owen (2015) had a completely different view of death as he did not praise death in the way Housman did but viewed it from a perspective different from that adopted by Housman. Owen believes people should not celebrate death since it causes significant challenges and agony among the victims. People should not think that soldiers who die in war are heroes. They face significant torture and agony in situations they cannot escape. His arguments aim to show people the negative view of death, where he encourages everyone to view it as the most significant enemy. In the same case, he does not appreciate young people dying before they accomplish their goals. Their death leaves their families and friends in harsh situations where it is difficult to control the situations perfectly.

On the other hand, Housman has a different view toward death, believing that death is a critical aspect that people should celebrate. He views it as an essential element that should come

when people are young before their achievements and legacies fade away. Houseman supports death and appreciates its occurrence without considering the loss and emotional challenges that other people may face. He creates a critical difference in reasoning and perspective from Owen since he wants people to understand that death initiates significant remembrance depending on the achievements that one has achieved. Houseman's *To an Athlete Dying Young* does not view death as a misfortune and darkness for people or the deceased. He says that the athlete's death has a positive result that covers the misfortunes that people may see. This aims at changing the audiences' mindset to view death as a positive aspect that prevents people from suffering distress after their achievements have been forgotten. According to his arguments, the athlete attains significant success following his death since he leaves a legacy after winning a race for his town. Therefore, people should not worry about death since he has left a legacy.

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