

The Aspects of Death in the Work of Poe and Melville

Kevin M. Watson

Literature is made most relevant to its readers when it deals with elements of human life. People deal with love, joy, hatred, and sorrow every day-- these make up the essence of our existence. When an author incorporates elements of life into his or her work, the reader is better able to enter the world that the author has created; the fiction attains an air of reality, and we are able to relate the written work to our lives. In order for literature to be fully potent and relevant to readers, it must deal with all aspects of life, including death. The human experience cannot be explored completely without dealing with death, as death is inseparable from human life. Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville include the element of death in their stories, and, in so doing, offer many different visions of death as perceived in the human mind.

Poe presents in "The Masque of the Red Death," the story of Prince Prospero, of his thousand friends, and of the peculiar fate that befalls them. Fearing the plague of the Red Death, these aristocrats elect to protect themselves by hiding in a fortified abbey with iron gates. They even weld the gates shut so as to escape the death that has taken hold of the outside world:

They resolved to leave means neither of ingress or egress to the sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within. The abbey was amply provisioned. With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself. (Poe 257)

In this way, these 1,001 persons plan to defy death for their own purposes. Their fortress is sealed, and surely the Grim Reaper can not come to claim their souls if there is no door by which to enter. Such is their ignorant and foolish belief. However, as Poe illustrates, Death will not be denied its prey. No wall, no gate, no impediment of any kind can stop Death from spreading its red plague and depriving the nobles of their lives.

This tale offers the reader three visions of Death. The first vision shows Death as an inexorable force, an aspect of human life from which men and women cannot separate. These aristocrats believe they can find immunity from the mortality of the outside world simply by separating themselves from it. However, the world does not work in this way; all living beings in this world have to meet their ending at some time or another. Poe writes as much in his work entitled, "Eureka-- A Prose Poem":

My general proposition then, is this:- *In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation* (Quinn 1261).

According to Poe, everything contains the seeds of its own destruction. One cannot escape from his or her eminent demise if that demise is a part of his or her nature. Prospero and his friends learn this truth to their great sorrow.

The second depiction of Death reveals a power in this world too unpredictable for anyone to prepare for under any circumstances. Death comes to men and women in countless forms and innumerable ways, as if it were chaos and entropy incarnate. For the revelers, Death comes in a mask and costume. "He had come like a thief in the night"-- so sudden is Death's arrival that no one can escape from it. In the time the revelers spend gawking at the phantasm, it has already spread the plague to everyone. "And one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall" (Poe 260). Despite all of their careful preparations and plans, they do not see Death coming until it is too late to act.

The final vision of Death offered in Poe's story shows Death as the ultimate arbiter, partial to no one. The court of Prospero is likely made up of the most wealthy and influential people of their country. When the plague comes to claim the land, they utilize their superior resources to defend themselves from it.

In the end, however, all their efforts come to naught. Death does not care that they are noble or wealthy. When the time comes, Death does not distinguish between classes, but rather, it claims "illimitable dominion over all" (Poe 260). In the end, everyone succumbs to the full wrath of the plague, just as all mortal men and women must inevitably succumb to the call of the grave.

Herman Melville presents in *Billy Budd* the story of a young sailor who is drafted into the British navy in wartime. Billy is an innocent, devoid of malice, cheerful of disposition, yet quick of temper. The treacherous Claggart seeks to engineer the destruction of young Budd, and, in so doing, destroys them both. Death provides the two sailors with an important lesson, though it comes too late to help them-- all actions have consequences, and our actions can determine the difference between living and dying. It is interesting, however, that Death should have different meanings for Claggart and Budd, even though Death claims them both.

Claggart meets his end at the fist of Billy Budd when he accuses the young sailor of plotting mutiny. Of course, the charge is unfounded, the product of Claggart's perverse imagination and his desire to destroy Budd. Melville reveals his sentiments about Claggart's death through the response of Captain Vere: "It is the divine judgment on Ananias!" (Melville 2693). Here, Death is perceived as administering justice upon the wicked, depriving Claggart of his life for the crime of treachery. In a Pyrrhic victory, however, Claggart, through his death, does indeed engineer the destruction of Billy Budd.

Budd's condemnation is intended to be another case of Death punishing the iniquitous, but Melville orchestrates Billy Budd's execution to show another vision of Death. With Budd's death, Melville provides an image of Billy ascending, as if into heaven:

At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn. (Melville 2708)

Undoubtedly, the death of Billy Budd is viewed by many readers to be unfair to the young sailor who has already borne so many troubles. Melville, as one of his letters suggests, would likely disagree:

My dear Hawthorne: People think that if a man has undergone any hardship, he should have a reward; but for my part, if I have done the hardest possible day's work, and then come to sit down in a corner and eat my supper comfortably-- why, then I don't think I deserve any reward for my hard day's work-- for am I not now at peace? Is not my supper good? My peace and my supper are my reward, my dear Hawthorne (Horth 211-212).

This is the difference between Claggart's death and Budd's death: Claggart's death is a punishment because it brings him no peace. However, Budd's death is a reward because it brings him the peace he could never have had while living; even if he had been proclaimed innocent, he would likely have suffered the rest of his life for murdering Claggart. By dying in the manner in which he does, Budd is able to pass from the world more or less uncorrupted by its evil, which is indeed a great reward.

Poe and Melville offer several different views of Death with their stories, but both offer a perspective that cannot be denied-- our nature determines our end. Prospero and his friends die in great horror and misery because they elected to save themselves and live for pleasure in the face of Death itself; their selfish nature leads them to a bad end. Claggart is struck down in the prime of his life because of his duplicitous and scheming mind; his evil nature leads him to a bad end. Budd is a good, honest, loving person who bears no ill will against any man living; though he dies for committing a crime, he still meets with a great end, for in dying, he gains Paradise. All of these characters were destined to die, as we are all destined to die. It is the nature of the characters that determines how they meet with their ends, good or ill, and their example provides the great lesson-- we cannot control or deny Death, but we can control how we live and how we meet our end.

Works Cited

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