



A Poetic Exploration of Death Aesthetics

—Comparative Analysis of W. H. Auden’s “Death’s Echo” and John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale”

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Abstract

This paper inquiry delves into the representation of death’s aesthetics within John Keats’ renowned composition “*Ode to a Nightingale*”, originating in the 19th century, and Wystan Hugh Auden’s poignant masterpiece, “*Echo of Death*”, which emerged in the 20th century. By approaching this exploration from three distinct vantage points, namely the “imagery of death”, “poetic wisdom”, and the profound “Dionysian spirit”. The author meticulously dissects the poetic creations of both visionaries. The primary objective is to unravel the inherent profundity of death and its intricate aesthetic implications as conveyed through their remarkable verses. In light of the extensive research conducted, it becomes evident that these gifted poets seamlessly merged the contemplation of mortality with their poetic expressions, thereby embarking upon a metaphysical exploration of life’s enigmatic facets. The intertwining of their reverence for death with an ardent cherishment of life imparts a transcendent solace, ultimately giving rise to an intricate interplay between aesthetic tension and the fusion of eternal existence with the realm of nothingness.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Death Aesthetics, *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats, *Death’s Echo*, Auden

1. Introduction

Death has constantly been a fantastically captivating subject for artists through-

out history. From Odysseus's wanderings through the underworld, Dante and Virgil's journeys through hell, to "Won-Done Song" from "The Story of the Stone", and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death", myths and epics are inseparable from the terror of death, and novels, poems, and essays are all crammed with reflections on existence and death. Death is an excellent subject for expressing an artist's inner values and feelings, and it has evolved into a precious work of art throughout literature.

The excellent performance of death is inseparable from the poet's superb poetic skills. The poet John Keats, who was active in the 19th century, used to be frequently threatened with the aid of dying all through his life. Death is a ubiquitous image or notion in Keats' poems. "Ode to a Nightingale" was once created in May 1819. The poet is in confusion, mystery and confusion, telling the grief in the real world, escaping from facts and reason in the lengthy and quiet beauty, and going to the illusory world with the singing of nightingales, pursuing extravagant death creates a romantic and magnificent creative realm.

Wystan Hugh Auden, a figure on the English and American poetry scene in the 20th century, was additionally a poet who frequently contemplated death. In Auden's poetry, there is a full combination of classical and contemporary civilization's awareness of death. "The Echo of Death" heavily draws from religious graves, using obscure symbols, fragmented images, subjective conveyances based on personal associations, and vague hints that gradually vanish within a context where time and space intertwine, and are reborn through a mysterious dance.

The two poets appear as two exotic flowers in the garden of world poetry, collectively promoting the flourishing of poetry. However, few scholars have conducted a comparative analysis of the two. In the early 1920s, economic inequality, war and mental turmoil drove Auden into anxiety, fear and sadness, while almost at the same age, the misfortunes of his emotional life and the torment of his physical illnesses haunted Keats, and they both expressed their respective perceptions of death in their works. The author here aim to discover the deep world of human consciousness under the thought of death in poetic art, find out about the aesthetic connotations and poetic implications of poetry, and appreciate the two poets' poetic concerns about the generation and humanity.

2. "Graceful and Lively" Imagery of Death

Imagery is an essential poetic image. Poets imbued their work with emotions through imagery. John Keats exhibited exceptional skills in employing imagery, which permeates his poetry abundantly. In "Ode to a Nightingale", a plethora of imagery vividly portrays the nightingale's melodious song, subtly hinting at Keats's comprehension and sensitivity towards death. Within the nightingale's melody, imagination possesses profound aesthetic value, evoking a resonant emotional response among readers.

"O, for a draught of vintage! That hath been
Cooled a long age in the deep-delv'd earth,

Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!" [1]

This sentence provides a vivid portrayal of the poet's inner world, accurately conveying his yearnings and ideals. Within the nightingale's song, Keats transcends the painful realities and barriers of the present, as his thoughts traverse the boundaries of time and space, surpassing the transient and fragile nature of life. By connecting his sensory experiences to a heightened level, he intertwines captivating images, such as "a draught of vintage", "Dance", "Provençal song", "sunburnt mirth" and "Flora". Through these associations, his restlessness finds solace, and his wounded heart finds consolation. His soul returns to the tranquil and lovely realm of Eden, where the entirety becomes serene and harmonious. This fleeting beauty signifies everlasting happiness to him. Imagination serves as Keats's refuge from worldly afflictions, as he merges with the nightingale, becoming one with the gentle night, and escaping the pains of mortality.

Through an aesthetic lens, the narrator transcends the mental obstacles brought about through a lifestyle of suffering, mitigates and digests the pain, thereby creating an atmosphere permeated with melancholic beauty [2].

"Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;" [1]

This is a scene of fading youth and decaying ancient age, filled with the scent of death and despair. Keats himself lived a lifestyle of hardship, plagued through tuberculosis. He experienced the difficulties in lifestyles and the risk of death. "youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies" expresses the transience and uncertainty of life, while "palsy" implies bodily decline and loss of strength. Death here is "a few, sad, last gray hairs", a brief portrayal that encapsulates the fragility and helplessness of life, but also displays a lofty emotion and reverence for life. He crystallizes the pain and shadow of death into poetry in a lovely manner, thereby sublimating it into a tragic and melancholic aesthetic meaning, elevating the suppressed existence in lifestyles to a distant and captivating realm.

In "*Echo of Death*", Auden offers a richly diverse textual world by means of alternately describing various interconnected elements. Interestingly, while these intricate images contain elements that transcend logic, they still exhibit characteristics that are fantastically logical. This contradiction reflects the complexity and multifaceted nature of human experience, with a poetic charm therein.

In a world where everything eventually becomes ephemeral and intangible, the idea of freeing oneself from the demands and constraints of the material world can be seen as a form of emancipation.

"The desires of the heart bend like a corkscrew,
It's better not to be born at all." [3]

This explains the complexity of human desire and the inherent limitations of human existence. The phrase "bend like a corkscrew" suggests that inner desires are distorted and unpredictable. The speaker believes it would be better not to be

born, which seems to be a response to the unpredictability and complexity of human desires. However, this assertion also reflects human understanding of unknown experiences and their inevitable limitations. [4] Death, as an ideal state, represents transcendence. In this sense, portraying death as something beautiful reflects the desire to overcome human limitations and achieve transcendence.

In a world where everything eventually becomes ephemeral and intangible, the narrator transforms people's fear and anxiety about death into an aesthetic pursuit, achieving transcendence and sublimation through death:

“Let the ladder of heaven descend from above,
Let laurels grow out of the martyr's blood” [3]

First, the “ladder of heaven” symbolizes the path to heaven, and its descent from above signifies that death can lead people to a higher realm. It additionally represents set up religious beliefs and moral concepts, as well as the exploration of the soul's destination when facing death. Secondly, “laurels”, a sacred plant, frequently represents glory, victory, and honor in ancient culture. “Martyr's blood” refers to life sacrificed for faith. Associating “laurels” with “martyr's blood” can be understood as obtaining noble and sacred honor via death. This now not only expresses the fear and unease about death, but also reveals the pursuit and sublimation of death in the aesthetics of death.

3. “Poetic Wisdom of Preferring Death to Life”

Vico first proposed the concept of “poetic wisdom” in his work “*New Science*”. This concept emphasizes the sentimental qualities of poets, which includes creativity and imagination. The core of poetry is to immerse people's thoughts, emotions, and souls completely in sensory experiences, opening up a talk between the senses and internal emotions. [5] Poetry has a positive experiential insight capability, enabling a better perception of the world via sensory and creative elaboration.

In Keats's “*Ode to a Nightingale*”, one way in which poetic wisdom is manifested is through the use of vivid sensory images. The song of the nightingale is described in superb detail, growing a sense of immersion in the sensory experience of the poem:

“Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;” [1]

The nightingale, as an image of an immortal creature, is no longer solely considered as a transcendence of abstract reasoning but also offers us insights into the real world. This exploration of death and transcendence indicates a deeper grasp of human experience, going beyond simple rational analysis;

“Away! Away! For I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy.” [1]

This suggests a desire to escape the boundaries of mortal existence, awakening the opportunity of poetic rebirth in the objective world. People realize that the power of art can transcend the constraints of death, linking us to something greater than ourselves. It echoes Vico's belief that poetry can figure the basic truths of human existence, which are beyond the full grasp of motive alone.

In addition, through imagery, metaphors, and imagination, poetry can convey deep emotions and thoughts.

“Adieu! Adieu! Thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades.” [1]

With vivid descriptions, the author uses his unique language and images to express the disappointment and helplessness of loss—the nightingale has gone, leaving only their song echoing around. This song is so clear, as if the singer is nevertheless beside us, but it is additionally hidden in the far-off valley, becoming far flung and tough to reach. Through the depiction of the song, the poem expresses the heaviness and helplessness brought by loss. Although the song remains, it is only a trace of their previous existence. This expression of emotion transcends the boundaries of language, revealing the complexity of emotions and the contradictions of human existence. This is exactly the key theme explored by poetic wisdom—the rich imagination and keen perception endow a poetic temperament, and the spirit yearns for freedom, the soul longs for liberation.

Similarly, in the poem “*The Echo of Death*”, we can perceive the echo of this poetic wisdom, peering into human potential amidst death, labor, and the brevity of human existence, and capturing the complexity and ambiguity of human experience.

Poetic wisdom is both primitive wisdom and an ideal wisdom state that people have been tirelessly depicting and following from ancient times to the present. The poem starts through describing the farmer's and fisherman's attachment to their homeland, evoking a sense of continuity and tradition passed down via generations and suggesting a feeling of prosperity and proper fortune. However, this sense of rootedness is rapidly undermined through the “low echo of death”, which creates a sense of disquiet and ambiguity, indicating that even the luckiest instances will eventually be subject to the caprices of fate and death.

“When there is nothing to gain,
Or the harvest is lost,
Or a bad May is encountered.” [3]

The sudden arrival of death reminds us of the impermanence of human existence and questions the fixed relationship between human beings and the land.

“They share the air and the city's bed,
Share the campsites in the mountains and the sea,
And each day brings some minor episodes,

Because of those unforgettable postures and conversational mechanisms.” [3]

This starts to hint at the brevity of life, with no friends to share it, as a consequence evoking a sense of the short-lived nature of human experiences and reflecting the impermanence and transience of relationships—friendships often built in shared moments, which are rapidly forgotten or lost. Modern people generally present a state of existence and development that contradicts the poetic. People’s aesthetic standards are no longer limited to the religious stage and have shifted towards material orientation.

Poets are adept at conveying deep emotions and thoughts through imagery, metaphors, and imagination. In the face of death, the limitations of human agency are acknowledged.

“Dreamers and drunkards thus sing and chant,
Until one day they finally wake up:
In the breeding fear and hidden lies,
The woods and their echoes have been recalled,
And you and I should answer death’s call.” [3]

The narrator uses the image of dreamers and drunkards to depict a state of escaping reality. They cover their fear and unease of death through singing and drinking, but in the end, they will wake up from this false illusion. We can’t absolutely escape the shadow of death, but we can enrich and revel in life as much as feasible within the limited time. This reveals our experience of powerlessness and limitations when dealing with death. This expression of emotion goes beyond the bounds of language and is precisely what poetry can accomplish.

4. “The Transient Spirit of Dionysus”

Nietzsche’s Dionysian spirit proposed in “*The Birth of Tragedy*” carries an affirmation of life and death, as well as a struggle and rebellion against traditional constraints. The state of intoxication brought through the Dionysian spirit can lead to the venting of individual inner stress and anxiety, in which one passionately indulges whilst shrouded in drunkenness. [6] Such tragic pleasure is essentially a metaphysical solace.

In Keats’s “*Ode to a Nightingale*”, the Dionysian spirit is embodied in the narrator’s exploration of extreme emotions and experiences, acceptance of death, and celebration of human primitive instincts. It portrays people’s uncontrollable state of immersion in imagination, a state that is evoked via the nightingale’s song and progressively fades away with its termination. As stated at the end of the poem, the author addresses the inevitability of death and decay.

“Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:
Do I wake or sleep?” [1]

Through the sensory trip of the nightingale’s song, the narrator exhibits the fantastic sensations that people feel in the pursuit of natural pleasure. This is a

reflection of the instinctive self. Deep in his heart, there are implications of the brief and fragile nature of life, yet additionally a strong pursuit of eternal continuity. [7] This opposition creates a sharp sense of sorrow, deeply imprinted on the narrator's soul.

Under the Dionysian extreme intoxication, the poet embraces intense emotions and experiences. The narrator regards the nightingale as a messenger from another world, serving as a way to transcend rationality and control. Gradually, it is diagnosed that happiness and pain are two vital elements in life, intertwined and mirrored in each other, mutually restrictive, showing the resilience of life in the tragic pain. Therefore, when death comes quietly, the soul achieves immortality. There is no more pain or sorrow, but instead, supreme happiness is obtained.

In "Echo of Death," the Dionysian intoxication liberates humans from the shackles of reason and civilization, restoring their natural instincts. Dancing reaches into the core of human nature, breaking down individual boundaries and dissolving the rational self. In ancient Greece, dance was the art form richest in Dionysian spirit. Amid the wild song and dance, people overlook the pains and torments of life. Auden conveys an encouragement of instinctive self-celebration thru the bodily act of dance, breaking conventional boundaries, and embracing the existential essence of chaos and ecstasy.

"Dance, dance, for the figure is easy,
The tune is catching and will not stop;
Dance till the stars come down from the rafters;
Dance, dance, dance till you drop." [3]

The narrator casts an eye on the interplay between existence and death. By dancing until "the stars come down from the rafters" and "till you drop", the narrator implies a kind of abandonment of ordinary constraints, as if even heaven itself can't contain the dancer's robust energy. While dance dissipates the dread of death, it additionally metaphorically suggests the advent of death, ascending to a metaphysical aesthetic height. [8] On the one hand, human beings living in painful reality desire to forget; on the other, they examine to enjoy the limitless tremors in the rhythm of music, pursuing an immortal existence.

At the same time, considering the ease with which happiness can be disturbed and the unpredictability of death itself, people can view the fate of death as an advocacy and admonition towards life itself—"dance while you can", using intoxicating dance to exhaust the body, briefly silencing rational thinking, freeing its followers from the pains of restraint, and effectively alleviating the bindings of repressed forces for its followers, realizing the team spirit of soul and body.

5. Conclusion

Ancient Greek philosophers incessantly probed the origins of the ceaseless dirge of death that permeates each realm of existence. The interplay between advent and decay, existence and death, has long been regarded by artists as a splendid

and unadulterated game. The charm of Keats and Auden's poetry emanates from their silent confrontation with mortality, seamlessly weaving the awareness of death into their verses, delving into metaphysical contemplations of life. These poems not only embody a deep reverence for death but also offer solace, transcending the mundane and conjuring a fascinating beauty via the convergence of the eternal and the void.

In the contemporary times, the boundless cosmos, the insignificance of one's own being, and the irrational nature of existence have intensified feelings of crisis and anxiety. It is also reasonable to find the meaning of the text at the level of the poet's creative experience and psychological journey. Furthermore, the understanding of death in modern times depicted in this poem has not yet been clarified, as it has not been discussed in this paper. In general, people will be firmly believe that the profound meditations on death will resonate profoundly with readers, transforming into an endless love for life that finds solace within their hearts, thereby embodying the essence of the aesthetics of death.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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