

Running Head: STOCKSLAGER

“Some Spirit Was Pursuing All of Us”: Literary Perspectives on Death

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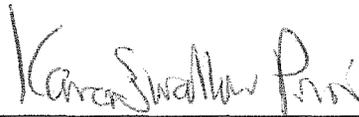
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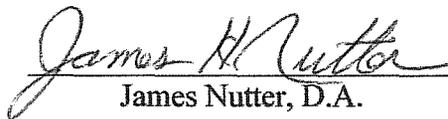
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Abstract

This paper will pursue the theme of death as a transgression against the created order through the works of five authors—the Apostle Paul, William Shakespeare, Alfred Tennyson, Dylan Thomas, and J.R.R. Tolkien—while also providing a brief overview of the perspectives on death presented in each author’s writings. The paper will demonstrate that although the five authors treat death with varying degrees of positive and negative tone, often in proportion to the orthodoxy of their Christian beliefs, their writings are in agreement that man was not created to die, and that death should not be spoken or written of lightly.

“Some Spirit Was Pursuing All of Us”: Literary Perspectives on Death

Jesus stood in front of the tomb of his friend Lazarus and cried. Preachers and commentators have always speculated on what made the Conqueror of Death weep at one isolated instance of mortality, especially when He fully intended to bring Lazarus back to life. Whatever His other reasons may have been—compassion for Mary and Martha, grief at the crowd’s unbelief, knowledge that Lazarus would eventually grow old and die once again—Jesus cried because He was human. At His incarnation, He had received the human sense of outrage against death (Yancey 179). Christians know, and all humanity senses, that death is a long aberration from the way things are supposed to be. Death is a consequence of sin; we were not created to die. In some mysterious, divine and human sense, as He cried at Lazarus’ tomb, Jesus the man “rage[d] against the dying of the light” (Thomas 122).

Because death is such a prevalent concern in the human mind, it is a universal theme in literature. Even in stories that celebrate life, death haunts the space between the lines and sometimes shows itself. The title of this paper comes from Jack Kerouac’s novel On the Road, in which the narrator, Sal Paradise, describes a dream of being chased through a desert by a mysterious individual. Sal concludes, “Naturally, now that I look back on it, this is only death: death will overtake us before heaven” (124). The image of death as a pursuing spirit is a fitting one. We can turn away from it and run in the other direction, but we can never completely disregard its presence.

No writer can ignore death, and some make it one of their primary themes. Five such writers are Paul, the author of thirteen New Testament epistles; the great English playwright William Shakespeare; Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the poetic voice of Victorian

England; the twentieth-century Welsh lyric poet Dylan Thomas; and J.R.R. Tolkien, language scholar and fantasy creator. The works of each of these authors speak of death as a universal injustice, but some of the authors, like Thomas, particularly emphasize the wrongness of death. Others, such as Paul and Tolkien, focus instead on the possible benefits of death; these tend to be the authors who are most orthodox and most articulate in their Christian beliefs.

The Apostle Paul

The Apostle Paul (c. 2-68 A.D.) is different from any other author that will be considered from this point. His writings should be read as literature, but as non-fictional and directly philosophical literature; and, more than just collections of human thought and observation, they are part of God's special revelation to man. The Apostle Paul formulated, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the set of doctrines that constitute what is generally known as the orthodox Christian view of death.

In his epistle to the Philippians, Paul describes his religious and philosophical background: “. . . circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews . . .” (3.5, NKJV). Paul was intensively trained in the Jewish worldview, which had an underdeveloped philosophy of death compared to other ancient cultures such as the Egyptian and Native American. Old Testament references to death rarely reach deeper than the factual statement that someone has died, and when such references do penetrate the surface, they usually focus on death as a separation from God (Green 36). Statements of faith in a resurrection, such as Job's triumphant, “I know that my Redeemer lives . . . in my flesh I shall see God” (19.25), occasionally shine through the murk of Sheol, but these are so rare as to be unsatisfactory

in trying to develop a Jewish framework of eschatology.

Thus, as intelligent and educated as Paul clearly was, he probably had little background in the philosophy of death before he received the revelation of Christ. In First Thessalonians, considered one of the oldest books of the New Testament, Paul delivers a matter-of-fact doctrinal statement on the resurrection of the dead. He bases this firm hope on the logic that Christ's resurrection is the precursor—or “firstfruits,” a term used several times in Paul's later writings—of all future resurrections (4.13-18).

Paul expounds upon the origin of death in the book of Romans, his monumental theological treatise. In the latter half of chapter five, he meticulously explains that death began when Adam sinned: “. . . through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned . . .” (5.12). Thus Paul acknowledges that man was not created to die. In this particular passage, Paul bypasses one of his favored themes, the foreknowledge of God, almost as if it were a moot point in this case. The important doctrine here is that if man had not sinned, death would not have entered the world.

Paul reiterates this concept in I Corinthians 15, another of his crucial passages about death and the resurrection. In verse 26, he refers to death as the “last enemy that will be destroyed.” This is Paul's authoritative statement on death as a universal event. Any later statement of Paul's that would seem to indicate that death is essentially positive must be interpreted in light of this verse. As the chapter progresses, Paul delves deeper into the doctrine of resurrection, explaining that the fleshly human body will be transformed into a glorified body. Near the end of this 58-verse theological tour de force, he states, “So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on

immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (15.55). The ending quotation is from Isaiah 25:8, one of those rare Old Testament resurrection references.

From these high pronouncements of universal death and future resurrection, Paul turns to contemplation of his own impending death in the first chapter of Philippians. One of Paul’s most famous and most succinct statements on death is verse 21: “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Two verses later, he says, “. . . I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better” (1.23). These verses have prompted many Christians to emphasize the benefits of death, sometimes to the point of undermining its seriousness and essential outrageousness. But these verses should be compared with I Corinthians 15.26, in which Paul speaks of death as an enemy. Certainly, death’s power over the individual Christian is crippled by Christ’s resurrection, but physical death remains a reality. Christians should indeed welcome death, when it comes, as a door into the presence of God, but they should never love death itself. Paul does not say that to die is good, but that “to die is gain” (Philippians 1.21). Christians should value death only for the benefit it brings, just as a man with a healthy appreciation for money values it only for the good things it can yield, not for itself.

In addition to his literal discussions of death and resurrection, Paul uses the concept of death metaphorically. Two major systems of death symbolism occur throughout his writings: death represents the state of a lost person before salvation, and it represents the decreased power of the fleshly nature after salvation. The image of death as the state of a sinful, unsaved human being is drawn primarily from Ephesians two,

which opens, “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (2.1). This verse emphasizes the powerlessness of the lost to act on their own behalf; the dead have no volition or ability. The transformation wrought by the saving grace of God is a symbolic resurrection. Verse six even speaks of a symbolic ascension, in which believers are pictured seated in a heavenly realm.

In Romans seven, Paul portrays sin as an active agent of death—not only future, literal death, but also the symbolic death of trespasses and sins. Romans 7.9 says, “. . . when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.” For the rest of the chapter and into the next, references to death abound—Paul says that sin actually killed him by deceiving him regarding the law (7.11); the flesh is called “this body of death” (7.24), and “to be carnally minded is death” (8.6). In these metaphors, the old Jewish concept of death as separation from God is evoked. Paul is showing that sin, like physical death—at least physical death without Christ—alienates man from his Creator.

Paul’s other major metaphorical use of death is to represent the replacement of the sinful nature with the spiritual nature, often referred to as “dying to self.” This doctrine has its roots in the teachings of Jesus, who once told His disciples, “. . . unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain” (John 12.24). Clearly this parable refers to the concept, stated at least once in each gospel, that “whoever loses his life for My sake will save it” (Luke 9.24). Paul develops this principle extensively in Romans six, in which he uses baptism as a death image. In the burial-like action of baptism—which, in the New Testament church, followed conversion so closely that the two events were often spoken of interchangeably—Christians are “united together in the likeness of [Christ’s] death”

(6.5). From this point on, Paul says, the sinful nature is “crucified” (6.6). Nailed to a tree, it can still assert itself, but it is virtually powerless. Paul continues this theme throughout his writings. Colossian 3.3 states explicitly, “. . . you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

Paul recognizes the enormity of death, referring to it as an enemy, teaching that it is a consequence of human sin, and using it as a metaphor to represent powerlessness and the alienation of man from God. At the same time, his works present one of the most positive outlooks on death in Western literature. Paul speaks of his own death with what could almost be called longing. This paradoxical philosophy is the result of being both human and Christian.

William Shakespeare

Shakespeare (1564-1616), unlike Paul, wrote works of imaginative literature which should first be valued for their craftsmanship. Philosophical principles are found in his plays, but the plays are not primarily didactic. Statements on death in Shakespeare’s works are less monolithic and harder to generalize than those in Paul’s works, but certain foundational ideas can be perceived in both the form of Shakespeare’s plays and their content.

Shakespeare’s comedies often include a death sentence or scheme, or an apparent death, as a crucial plot device. In Much Ado about Nothing, The Winter’s Tale, Measure for Measure, and Cymbeline, characters who were presumed dead experience a sort of resurrection in the minds of their families, friends, and lovers (Veith 114). Samuel Schuman, a scholar of the psychology of Shakespeare, wrote, “In the world of comedy, unlike the world of tragedy, or the real world, it seems to make good sense not to say a

final farewell . . . Comedies . . . are plays of resurrection and much of their magic lies in the suggestion that we may, in fact, be able to see again those whom we thought were gone forever” (192). For the Christian, however, resurrection is indeed part of the real world. According to Christian author Gene Edward Veith, Christians can have a comic view of life, since they are “given a hope which can translate into a comic ending” (115).

Shakespeare’s tragedies do not contradict his comedies philosophically; they only provide a shockingly different vantage point on the same worldview. The comedies, with their quickly-paced action and surprise “resurrections,” barely have time to focus on the weightiness of death. In contrast, the tragedies, with their soliloquies and their real, permanent deaths, contain some of the world’s best-known statements on man’s mortality. Hamlet, in which nearly every principal character is dead by the end of the play, is an excellent representative of the tragedies.

Hamlet speaks two famous soliloquies on the theme of death and specifically of suicide. His speech in act one, scene two is mostly about his disgust with his mother’s conduct, but he begins by deploring his own life. He wishes “that the Everlasting had not fixed his canon ‘gainst self-slaughter” (1.2.131-32). This line must be understood in the context of Roman Catholic Church dogma. In Shakespeare’s day, those who committed suicide were thought to be automatically doomed to hell: since the final sin is committed simultaneously with death, one has no opportunity to confess the sin.

Hamlet is by no means a devout Catholic, but he does believe in God and his punishment. Unlike Macbeth, another of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, who believes in punishment after death but chooses to disregard it, Hamlet has a serious fear of what awaits him in the afterlife. James L. Calderwood, in his study of being and not-being in

Hamlet, speaks of two different conceptions of death: either it is an end to consciousness, or it is a “way station” on the road to a nightmarish afterlife (137). Hamlet wishes that death could be the end. In his other famous speech, he considers the option “to die, to sleep” (3.1.60, 64). But with the next breath, he realizes that not all sleep is unconscious; to sleep is “perchance to dream” (65). There is the rub, indeed: “what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil” (66-67) are not necessarily pleasant ones.

In act 3, scene 1, lines 57-61, Hamlet ponders whether it is nobler to live or to take one’s own life. The ancient Romans considered suicide more respectable than a disgraceful life—Hamlet’s friend Horatio calls himself “more an antique Roman than a Dane” when he attempts to drink from a poisoned cup in the final scene (5.2.342). Shakespeare scholar Horst Breuer states Hamlet’s dilemma this way: “Is it nobler stoically to bear the humiliation of an inglorious life, or heroically to destroy oneself and therewith end an untenable situation?” (15) He points out the use of battle or siege imagery—“slings and arrows”—to denote the heroic struggle with “outrageous fortune” (14). Hamlet’s conclusion is that to end one’s own troubles would be the noble choice if not for the prospect of entering “the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns” (3.1.79-80).

But one traveler does, for a short time, return from that country—the Ghost of Old Hamlet. The Ghost gives Hamlet a firsthand look at the horrors of the afterlife—in this case, Purgatory. His doom is “for a certain term to walk the night, and for the day confined to fast in fires . . .” (1.5.10-11). If Hamlet believes the Ghost, the recollection of these words would be enough to dissuade him, even in a desperate moment, from self-

slaughter.

Not every character in the play views death in the same way that Hamlet does. In act one, scene two, Hamlet's mother delivers a line about death which, though true in substance, seems almost vulgarly shallow in comparison to Hamlet's profound musings. Attempting to encourage her son to cease mourning for his father, she says, "Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity" (72-73). She asks Hamlet, "Why seems it so particular with thee?" (75). He replies, "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.' . . . I have that within which passes show; these but the trappings and the suits of woe" (76, 85-86). He is referring to his dark clothing, his sighs, his tears, and other conventions of mourning that have persisted from Shakespeare's day to ours. Hamlet suggests that the outward signs of sorrow, because they can be assumed by someone who is not experiencing the inward emotion, may undercut the enormity of death.

Hamlet demonstrates that Shakespeare keenly perceived the human attitude of ambivalence toward death. Sometimes death seems like a desirable alternative to a tiresome and horrific earthly existence, but fear of the largely unknowable afterlife stops many people, though certainly not all, from wishing for or attempting to bring about their own death. Shakespeare's comedies do not deny the intensity of this dilemma, but they offer a clue about what happens following death—perhaps what we call the afterlife is actually a restoration to life.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was poet laureate of England for almost half of the Victorian period, a time when long-held beliefs were being shaken by an influx of

new developments in science, historiography, and philosophy. Through his responsibility as poet laureate to be the voice of his people, Tennyson's poetry expresses the Victorian tension of faith and doubt. His writings on death, in particular, were also shaped by a personal experience that took place when he was only twenty-four—the death of his dear friend Arthur Henry Hallam. Soon after this life-altering event, Tennyson began the composition of his monumental collection of 131 elegies, In Memoriam.

Though In Memoriam consists of Tennyson's personal attempts to cope with Hallam's death, sometimes generalized statements on death emerge, as in the famous line, "T'is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all" (poem 27, lines 15-16). This sentence has become a cliché applied not only to bereavement, but to romantic breakups and other kinds of loss, since the aspect of death addressed in this particular elegy is the termination of relationships.

Though the elegy is always well-ordered, the tone is of emotional reaction rather than of calm reasoning. Nevertheless, Tennyson scholar Elton Edward Smith points out that Tennyson recognized the universal nature of what he was saying: "In accordance with the traditions of the classical elegy, Tennyson moves from personal grief to a consideration of broad and lofty themes concerning the reality of God's purpose in history and the world, as well as his own destiny as a man and a poet" (88).

In poem 21 of In Memoriam, Tennyson assumes the persona of a bard who overhears three travelers discuss his motives for singing about his deceased friend. One accuses him of weakness; another assumes he delights in making a display of his own sorrow; the third rebukes the practice of private mourning when the world is changing at a dramatic rate. The poet's response—"Behold, ye speak an idle thing; ye never knew

the sacred dust. I do but sing because I must” (21.21-23)—echoes Hamlet’s response to his mother regarding the appearance versus the substance of mourning.

One of the themes of Tennyson’s poetry is the typically Victorian struggle to maintain belief in the existence of God in the face of contemporary philosophy, evolutionary theories, and difficult personal events such as Hallam’s death. In “The Two Voices,” the speaker ponders the same dilemma that so distressed Hamlet; the working title of the poem was “The Thoughts of a Suicide.” The poem is a debate between the poetic voice, which insists that life is worth living, and an unidentified voice that attempts to convince the poetic voice otherwise (Smith 16). The tone of Tennyson’s works, instead of experiencing broad changes over time, continually swings between doubt and faith. Indicative of this dilemma, in one of his first collections, Tennyson published two poems with the names “Nothing Will Die” and “All Things Will Die” (Smith 15).

While some of Tennyson’s poems, such as “The Two Voices,” end with a tenuous victory for faith which is based largely on emotion and which leaves the reader feeling unsettled, two poems in particular end with faith unequivocally triumphant. One is “Love and Death,” an early work that is rarely anthologized. The poem is a short conversation between a personification of Death, who asserts his power over “the thymy plots of Paradise” (2), and a personification of Love, who reminds Death that his power is only temporary. Love asserts that death is only “the shadow of life” (10), so that when earthly life ends, so will the threat of death. “But,” says Love in the final line of the poem, “I shall reign for ever over all” (15).

The other poem of triumphant faith, much more famous than “Love and Death,” is “Crossing the Bar,” which appears at the end of every Tennyson anthology. In this

beautiful poem, Tennyson compares a dying person to a ship embarking from a sheltered bay, across the bar into the deep ocean. The speaker wishes that his own death would be as quiet as a slow, full tide, without the crash of waves. But regardless of his manner of passing, he concludes, “I hope to see my Pilot face to face when I have crost the bar” (15-16). Because of the poem’s utter calmness in the face of death, the word “hope” is probably not used in the common modern sense, as virtually a synonym for “wish,” but as it is used by the Apostle Paul in Romans 5.5: “Now hope does not disappoint.” No one knows why Tennyson requested that “Crossing the Bar” appear at the end of each collection of his works, but the fact seems significant that this poem, with its calm hope, appears as a conclusion to a violent intellectual and emotional struggle between faith and doubt. Often the side that speaks last is the side that wins.

Like the Apostle Paul, Tennyson frequently employs death imagery. One of his most persistent motifs is the singing, dying swan which is referred to in four different poems. Among other symbolic meanings, the swan and its song represent themes such as “how poetry can serve as a ‘strategy’ for dealing with loss and pain . . . and . . . how art itself can withstand decay and death” (Stevenson 622). Another symbol related to death is the evening star, used in In Memoriam as a symbol of resurrection, or at least some sort of existence after death (Stevenson 628).

In “The Passing of Arthur,” the concluding tale in Tennyson’s Idylls of the King, the dying swan appears as a simile for the boat that carries King Arthur on his last voyage out of Camelot, to the blessed isle of Avilion, where he will be healed of a serious wound received in battle. The traditional Arthurian legend is surrounded by prophecies that Arthur will one day return to England at a time of great need, but Tennyson places little

emphasis on this possibility. The only mention in “The Passing of Arthur” of this resurrection of sorts is when Sir Bedivere, the knight who stays with Arthur until the end, cries out as he watches the boat slip away, “He passes to be king among the dead, and after healing of his grievous wound he comes again” (449-51). But Arthur’s return is not certain for Bedivere; he qualifies his next statement with “but—if he come no more” (451). Arthur himself is doubtful whether he will even make it to Avilion. He says, “I am going a long way . . . if indeed I go—for all my mind is clouded with a doubt” (424-26). Every author who has retold the tales of King Arthur has, to some degree, projected the values of his or her time period onto the stories. Tennyson’s Arthur, as a man who, though he tries to uphold the Christian faith throughout his life, nevertheless experiences moments of doubt, is a distinctly Victorian character.

The pervasiveness of death as both a theme and a symbol in Tennyson’s poetry—particularly in the massive In Memoriam—indicates the prevalence of death as a concern in the Victorian mindset. Tennyson represented the spirit of the age in his honest treatment of the topics of death and uncertainty. The Victorian period is often characterized as an age of grandiose facades, and Tennyson’s poetry may appear, at first reading, as nothing but a dramatic show. But sensitive attention to the tone and the meaning of the skillfully selected words reveal his works as unpretentious to a degree that is normally associated with twentieth-century poetry.

Dylan Thomas

Perhaps one of the least pretentious poets of all time is Dylan Thomas (1914-1953). Like Tennyson, he approaches painful and confusing themes with honesty, but unlike Tennyson’s style, Thomas’s style is raw, sometimes offensive, and often as

confusing as death itself. Arguably the most outstanding feature of his poetry is its organic content. His poems address earthy topics like birth, sex, plant growth, eating, disease, and most of all, death. A glance over the table of contents in a Thomas collection reveals titles such as “When, like a running grave,” “The tombstone told when she died,” “Deaths and Entrances,” and, simply, “Lament.” Thomas’s poetry is preoccupied with the tangible aspects of death: the cessation of bodily functions, burial, and decay. When Thomas was twenty-one years old, he reportedly made the inaccurate prophecy, “I shall be dead within two years, drinking, exploring, going to the devil” (qtd. in Stanford 7). This statement may sound like the words of a man with a flippant attitude toward life and death, but Thomas’s poetry indicates just the opposite. Perhaps no author displays such a highly developed sense of the vastness and essential wrongness of death than Dylan Thomas.

Despite the vices of his life, Thomas’s poetry is informed by basic Christian beliefs. Critic Karl Shapiro writes, “He believed in God and Christ, the Fall and death, the end of all things and the day of eternity. . . . But one feels that these matters are not of paramount importance in the poetry of Thomas. . . . Religion is not to be used: it is simply part of life, part of himself” (174). These beliefs manifest themselves in Thomas’s poetry not as doctrines to be defended, but as assumptions almost to be taken for granted, including the assumption that death is a consequence of the Fall. For this reason, in Thomas’s poems death is portrayed as a part of life, but not *just* a part of life. Death is horrible in Thomas’s world. In the poem “When once the twilight locks no longer” he describes the dead this way: “All issue armoured, of the grave, the redhaired cancer still alive, the cataracted eyes that filmed their cloth; some dead undid their bushy

jaw, and bags of blood let out their flies” (19-23). Professor Elder Olson describes the world of Thomas’s poetry, specifically his early poetry, as “a nightmare universe, a universe of darkness and fright” (58). In this universe, there is no room for romanticized death.

“Do not go gentle into that good night,” probably Thomas’s best-known poem, is a son’s plea for his father not to die without putting up an emotional and verbal fight. The phrase “go gentle into that good night” carries the connotation of slipping into death peacefully and perhaps ignorantly. The poet argues that a man cannot possibly look back upon his life without experiencing at least some amount of regret, and therefore cannot possibly submit to the termination of his life without wishing for a chance to do more, or to do differently. In the four middle stanzas of the six-stanza villanelle, Thomas names four kinds of men and the regrets that they experience: “wise men” (4) wish their words had been more powerful, “good men” (7) wish their deeds had been greater, “wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight”—perhaps poets—“learn, too late, they grieved it on its way” (10-11), and “grave men” (13) realize they could have lived happier lives.

Finally, the speaker urges his father to “curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears” (16). In Jonathan Westphal’s interpretation of the poem, the object of “curse” is the father’s swiftly ending life, and the object of “bless” is the son. Westphal writes, “If the father did not curse his life, and thereby separate himself from it, he would die with it in its dying light and slide gently into the soft night . . . in so fighting death he will incidentally approve his son’s life” (114-15). Whether or not this interpretation is correct, “Do not go gentle,” with its angry, violent vocabulary, remains one of the best poems in the English language at conveying the common human sense of outrage at

death's robbery of life and all of its potential.

Thomas had a tendency to assign lengthy titles to his poems, but "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" outdoes nearly all of them. This poem raises the concern expressed by Hamlet regarding mourning and the substance behind it. Thomas explains the title in these crucial lines: "I shall not murder the mankind of her going with a grave truth nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath with any further elegy of innocence and youth" (14-18). The rest of the poem expresses the silence of the earth as it receives the body of the dead girl. Thomas's argument is that since the earth accepts death, once it occurs, so should man, quietly. To summarize a death in a few lines of poetry or in a pithy moral statement is to futilely attempt to rob death of its vastness and make it controllable.

The exhortation to meet death with silence does not contradict the exhortation to rage in "Do not go gentle." The poet admonishes a dying man to fight against his impending death; in the other poem, he admonishes himself to be silent in the face of a death that has already occurred. This silence is not a result of the kind of senile resignation that "Do not go gentle" urges against; rather, it is a result of awe in the presence of something larger and more powerful than anything else in earthly existence.

Thomas's poems convey a vision of death as something vast, awesome, unjust, and hideous. Yet the title of one of his most beautiful poems is "And death shall have no dominion." In this three-stanza piece, the title phrase is repeated six times, at regular intervals. Repetition of entire lines is a device Thomas rarely uses; this poem and "Do not go gentle" are exceptions. Thomas may have intended "And death shall have no dominion" to sound like a prophetic pronouncement, since the language and the theme of

the poem echo Paul's grand declaration of the defeat of death in I Corinthians 15 (Stanford 75). But Thomas's depiction of life after, or in spite of, death is less clear than Paul's. According to critic Derek Stanford, this poem is not about bodily resurrection, but about "the persistence of the life-force" (76). Though death is one of Thomas's major themes, he says little elsewhere about what happens after death. A few years before his death, he began a poem called "In Country Heaven," which refers to those former occupants of Earth who now inhabit the country Heaven. But the poem was never finished, and in Thomas's prose sketch of the rest of the piece, the focus is clearly on Earth; the citizens of Heaven are merely spectators.

Dylan Thomas's primary contribution to literary discourse on death is his vivid depiction of the horror of death, in both the repulsiveness of organic decay and the immense fear and regret of coming to the end of earthly existence. Though death is everywhere in his poetry, it never becomes a poetic convention; each time it appears, it retains its ability to shock and dismay. But even in Thomas's "nightmare universe" (Olson 58), ultimately "death shall have no dominion."

J.R.R. Tolkien

Unlike the rakish Thomas, J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973), in the popular conception, was a homey sort like the hobbits he created, holed up in his chambers with his pipe and nothing but his knowledge of old books and philology, and his imagination, from which to draw ideas. In reality, while Tolkien did indeed smoke pipes and was intimately familiar with old books, he had seen much of the world outside academia. Though his works are often criticized as escapist, they portray the realities of life and death. As a young man Tolkien had fought in World War I, and he began writing his mythology

during this time. Tolkien scholar Tom Shippey writes, “No doubt it was a temptation for a young man, in the middle of a great war, with no close living relatives and most of his friends dead, to lose himself in dreams of a world where none of this need be true . . . But if Tolkien did this . . . he also gave equal space, equal prominence to the loss and resignation” (303). However, though he never avoids the issue of death, his treatment of it is positive, even joyful.

Tolkien’s Middle-earth mythology was a project that spanned most of his life and included The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, The Silmarillion, The Book of Lost Tales, and other minor works. In this mythology, the two races of beings created by the highest deity are Elves and Men. According to The Silmarillion, “Immortal were the Elves, and their wisdom waxed from age to age, and no sickness nor pestilence brought death to them. . . . But Men were more frail, more easily slain by weapon or mischance, and less easily healed; subject to sickness and many ills; and they grew old and died” (118). In other words, Elves can die in battle or calamity, but death is not their common fate, as it is the common fate of Men.

The race of Men is born into a world where evil, and hence death, already existed. Melkor, one of the Valar, or great spirits, has rebelled against the created order and has led some Elves into error as well. With this aspect of his mythology, Tolkien demonstrates two equally correct ways to look at death as a result of sin. Death may be seen as a negative consequence of sin, and it may also, without contradiction, be seen as a route of deliverance from existence in a sinful, twisted world, or from “endless serial living” (On Fairy-Stories 68). For this reason, Tolkien in The Silmarillion refers to “the gift of death” (312). When one of the kings of Men complains to the Valar that he has

been punished by death for the sins of others, the Valar answer, ““But that was not first appointed for a punishment. Thus you escape, and leave the world, and are not bound to it, in hope or in weariness”” (316).

Eventually, as Men become more prideful and rebellious, the pain and horror of death begins to outweigh the blessing it provides in the form of escape: “For whereas aforetime men had grown slowly old, and had laid them down in the end to sleep, when they were weary at last of the world, now madness and sickness assailed them; and yet they were afraid to die and go out into the dark . . .” (328). The race of Men faces the same dilemma as Hamlet—they are weary of life but afraid of death. They, too, “rage against the dying of the light” (Thomas 122).

Besides the Middle-earth works, another of Tolkien’s writings that addresses the topic of death is the volume Tree and Leaf, which includes the essay On Fairy-Stories and the short story Leaf by Niggle. The essay explains that fairy-stories fulfill the human desires for fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation (46). Tolkien says that “the oldest and deepest desire . . . [is] the Escape from Death” (68). The best fairy-stories, like Shakespeare’s comedies, offer the possibility that death can be reversed. One of Tolkien’s most famous contributions to literary theory is the term “eucatastrophe,” which he defines as “the happy ending: or more correctly . . . the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous ‘turn’”(68). Tolkien’s own stories include such “turns” not only at their conclusions, but also throughout their action. In The Lord of the Rings, ten different characters are presumed dead and found alive, and one, Gandalf, actually experiences death, resurrection, and glorifying transformation (Noel 27).

Tolkien simplified and illustrated some of the principles of On Fairy-Stories in the

short fantasy Smith of Wootton Major, his last story. Although the purpose of the story was to explain the meaning of “Fairy,” it also revealed apprehensions about death. Tolkien, who did not normally write about his personal connections to his work, referred to Smith of Wootton Major as “an old man’s story, filled with the presage of bereavement” (qtd. in Carpenter 243).

Leaf by Niggle, the second half of Tree and Leaf, is the story of a painter named Niggle who knows he must go on a long journey but fails to properly prepare. One day, when Niggle is engrossed in his life-long project of painting the tree that inhabits his imagination, a driver arrives to take him on his journey. He is taken to an infirmary in a railway station, where he is assigned to menial labor. During his stay in the infirmary, he hears authoritative yet benevolent voices, which may represent the persons of the Godhead, discussing his progress. Finally he is taken to a beautiful country where the tree he had always attempted to paint is finished and alive and where he is reunited with his former neighbor. Niggle’s guide around the country is a shepherd, who could be interpreted as a Christ figure.

Some critics have viewed Leaf by Niggle as an allegory of Tolkien’s life or his creative process, but whether or not this is so, the journey that Niggle must take is unmistakably symbolic of death. Since Tolkien was a Roman Catholic, the railway station probably represents Purgatory, and the land where Niggle finds his tree bears a strong resemblance to Heaven, where Christians hope to find the fulfillment of all the worthwhile projects they have begun on earth. Because of Leaf by Niggle’s theme as well as its autobiographical flavor, a group of respectful American readers included the full text of the story in a memorial service that they held for Tolkien several weeks after

his death (Carpenter 260).

In Tolkien's works, death may be a journey, but it is not a journey to be taken lightly. Niggle knows that he should prepare for his journey, and the fact that he has put off doing so causes him anxiety when he is forced to depart. Similarly, in Middle-earth, no one goes gently into the Undying Lands—the blessed realm to which Elves sail when their time in Middle-Earth is over. They may not physically die, but they are sundered from earthly existence and from all that is familiar. Even the calmest crossings of the bar—in this case, the harbor at the Gray Havens—are accompanied by tears. Tolkien scholar Ruth S. Noel writes, “Although they went beyond death to the Blessed Realm, the travelers went beyond the living world as well, and endured a poignant separation from their lands and kin. Tolkien believed that such mingling of joy and grief is the characteristic resolution in the most memorable of the world's lore” (27).

Conclusion

Like the spirit in Sal Paradise's dream, death has been found omnipresent in the writings discussed in this paper. It has appeared amid the horror of rampant decay in Thomas's early poems, but it has also shown up amid the joy of springtime love in Shakespearean comedies. Each time, it has taken a different form, but points of agreement can be observed among some of the selected writings.

A clear point of agreement among all of the works is that death is vast and outrageous and should not be spoken or written of lightly. Death is powerful enough to drive the intelligent Hamlet mad, to strike a poet into awed silence on hearing of a child's death, to inspire rage in a dying old man and his son, and to cause the race of Men to rebel against the divine order—in Tolkien's world as well as in our own. One of the

reasons mankind is so repelled by the prospect of death is revealed in several of the works: death was not an original part of human experience. Paul teaches this explicitly in his explanation of the consequences of Adam's sin. In Tolkien's mythology, death does not enter the world until after the rebellion of Melkor and the Elves who followed him.

Another point of agreement is the portrayal, in Paul's letters and Tennyson's poem "Crossing the Bar," of the death of a Christian as a positive event enabling the individual to be with God—"far better," Paul says in Philippians, than life apart from His presence. In Tolkien's Leaf by Niggle, the voices in the railway station and the shepherd could also represent encounters with God in the afterlife. Niggle's arrival in his country is certainly a positive event, though his initial departure is fraught with anxiety, since, just as in "Crossing the Bar," he is forced to leave his "bourne of Time and Place" (Tennyson 578).

A related theme is that of the reversibility of death. Shakespeare's comedies portray virtual resurrections—"eucatastrophes," as Tolkien would call them. The legend of King Arthur's return from Avilion as mentioned in "The Passing of Arthur," as well as the evening star image in In Memoriam, are intimations of resurrection that shine through the fog of Victorian doubt in Tennyson's poetry. Finally, Thomas's "And death shall have no dominion," though it does not explicitly refer to bodily resurrection, portrays life as indestructible.

Paul called death "the last enemy"; Shakespeare called it "shuffl[ing] off this mortal coil"; Tennyson called it "the shadow of life"; Thomas called it "the dying of the light"; Tolkien called it "go[ing] out into the dark." Each of these authors looked death in the face and recorded what he had seen. Each wrote about regrets, partings, fears,

darkness, decay. Yet all of them were able to echo, though only Paul echoed them verbatim, the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

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