

## Poetry

The nature of poetry throughout history has been one that is crucial to the English language. Poems have experimented with the borders of language as a means of powerfully expressing the sometimes abstract nature of the human experience. While scholars debate the validity of various poets and poems, a select number of poems have continually presented themselves as cornerstone elements of the debate. Furthermore, certain themes have emerged through a sort mythology within these poems, perhaps providing a clue to some of life's mysteries. This essay examines some of these themes, specifically love, life, death, and the concept of god, through four seminal poems – Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress', John Betjeman's 'In Westminster Abbey', William Shakespeare's 'Life as the Waves Make Toward the Pebbled Shore', and Emily Dickinson's 'I Could Not Stop for Death'.

Andrew Marvell's poem 'To His Coy Mistress' articulates the themes of love, life, and death in a variety of ways. The poem's overarching subject matter features a man that is attempting to seduce a woman by informing her about the immediacy of the moment and the passing of time. The poem assumes its literary merit and notability through the implementation of language that Marvell uses to convey these points. In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker indicates that the woman is resisting his advances; the poet states, "Had we but world enough, and time,/ This coyness, lady, were no crime" (Marvell, 1-2). As the stanza continues, Marvell references a number of historical events as a rhetorical strategy. For instance, he states if time were not a factor he would love the woman ten years before the Flood, ostensibly referring to the seminal Biblical flood. As the poem continues Marvell

further advances his seductions through telling the woman about their fading youth. He states, "Now therefore, while the youthful hue/ Sits on thy skin like morning dew,/ And while thy willing soul transpires/ At every pore with instant fires," (Marvell, 33-36). While these elements surface in relation to seduction intentions, they also constitute a perspective on life and death. In these regards, the poem constitutes a comprehensive portrait of the passing time and the need to live for the day.

John Betjeman's poem 'In Westminster Abbey' considers the theme of life and the concept of God in a number of incarnations. The poem itself seemingly occurs in a time of war and as such the poet makes direct pleas to God to carry out certain wishes. For instance, he states, "Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans./ Spare their women for Thy Sake,/ And if that is not too easy/ We will pardon Thy Mistake" (Betjeman's, 7-10). In terms of life the poet considers a number of elements related to the individual's interaction with their country and the various elements that provide this country with identity. Betjeman states, "Think of what our Nation stands for,/ Books from Boots and country lanes,/ Free speech, free passes, class distinction,/ Democracy and proper drains" (Betjeman, 19-22). In these regards, the poem presents a powerful encapsulation of the nature of existence within this wartime context. These elements are further notable as the poet implements rhyming as a rhetorical tool in establishing their power. This has the effect of giving the descriptions a lyrical aura that further involves the reader in their articulations. Ultimately, the poem concludes with the poet proclaiming his goodness in front of

God, demonstrating the highly Christian characterization of the God concept in this poem.

William Shakespeare's sonnet 'Like as the Waves Make Towards the Pebbled Shore' considers the themes of life, death and love from a variety of perspectives. When considering Shakespeare's sonnet one considers the nature of Maxwell's 'To His Coy Mistress' in that both works consider the nature of life as short and focus on the need of the individual to live their life for the moment. Shakespeare begins his sonnet by stating, "Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,/ So do our minutes hasten to their end;" (Shakespeare, 1-2). Here Shakespeare is implementing a simile to compare the nature of receding waves to the transitory nature of life. Perhaps the most notable aspect is the tightly constructed iambic pentameter structure that the work is set in. In these regards, Shakespeare is able to implement his notable lyricism with the tight confines of structure as a means of establishing a truly seminal work. While the speaker is ostensibly attempting to seduce a young woman with his words the poem takes on metaphysical connotations as the line is blurred between love and God. In the final two lines Shakespeare implements a rhyming couplet, "And yet, to times, in hope, my verse shall stand,/ Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand" (Shakespeare, 13-14). Here Shakespeare seems to be speaking not to a woman, but to a God figure that is responsible for the passage of time. Ultimately, it's this ambiguous feature that gives the poem part of its rhetorical power.

Emily Dickson's 'I Could Not Stop for Death' considers the themes of life and death in a powerful rhetorical style. Throughout the poem Dickinson implements a

four-line stanza structure with sporadic rhyming techniques in implementing a powerful articulation of the concept of morality. The poem's opening lines perhaps best encapsulate the work's overriding tone of whimsical despondency; Dickinson writes, "Because I could not stop for Death,/ He kindly stopped for me;/ The carriage held but just ourselves/ And Immortality" (Dickinson, 1-4). As the poem advances, Dickinson continues the metaphor of death as an individual or driver that has a physicality. In the poem's final stanza the poet refers to her current situation, indicating that centuries pass quickly. This is a concept of death that contains an afterlife, but perhaps more accurately reflects Dickinson's slightly ironic and detached perspective on the subject.

In conclusion, this essay has considered the thematic tendencies of love, life, death, and the concept of god in four seminal poems: Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress', John Betjeman's 'In Westminster Abbey', William Shakespeare's 'Life as the Waves Make Toward the Pebbled Shore', and Emily Dickinson's 'I Could Not Stop for Death'. In these regards the essay has demonstrated that the poems demonstrate varying degrees of the predominant themes. Similarly, the essay has demonstrated the variety of literary techniques that have been implemented as rhetorical tools in establishing these themes.

### **References**

Rotzheim, William. (2006). *The Giant Book of Poetry*. New York: Macmillan.

Shakespeare, William. Sonnet 60 'Like as the Waves Make Towards the Pebbled Shore' <http://www.albionmich.com/inspiration/likeasthewaves.html>