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Looking into Death: An Evolution through Time in England from the Middle Ages to 1800

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Abstract

Death has long been a topic in concern for all humans. Regardless of gender, nationality or time period, we all reach the same destination: death. However, the interpretation of death itself does not always stay the same, but radically evolves throughout history, as reflected in multiple literary works. This paper, therefore, will examine the evolution of death notions with special regards to England from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century - from the time of persistent threat of the Black Death to the modern colonial period. Exploring the death of the three rioters in "The Pardoner's Tale" of Geoffrey Chaucer's masterpiece *Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) and the protagonist's death in "Oroonoko" of Aphra Behn (1688), the paper will dissect each death to illustrate its relationship with the contemporary common belief. Following the indepth multi-dimensional analyses of other critical book and journals besides the primary texts, this research will also indicate the shift from the medieval romantic and religious mindset to the dominance of realism and humanistic world before the 1800s in England. Over time, we cease to perceive death as a necessary means to pay for sins, but witness the replacement of a totally different frame of mind, in which the colonists become "the Almighty" and death for justice disappears from scene.

Keywords: Death, Middle Ages, Humanism

1. Introduction

Death. Murder. Suicide. Assassination. Massacre. So what? Is it too normal a thing that we show few sympathy every time we hear about death? At least, this is the view of some twenty-first century citizens who, having witnessed a tons of even more shocking news in their life, have grown to turn a dead face at such sorrow. What can we do in the end, if not to let it go? This, however, is not the case in England two hundred years ago, when such subject as death, "in addition to being universal and at least initially ungendered, is almost always simultaneously a comment on some aspect of life" (Whiting 78). Interestingly, interpretation of death has evolved from the Middle Ages to the 1800s, especially from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, as reflected in the "Pardoner's Tale" in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and "Oroonoko" of Aphra Behn.

2. Literary Critiques

"The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale," written in the context of the Black Death when death was perceived as an ever present reality, contains a great deal of Chaucer's notion about death at his time. The Black Death was not something to be dismissed. Rose Cerofeci, in her journal "Death and Dying in the Middle Ages," informs that "During the Middle Ages, beginning in 1348, the persistent threat and recurring reality of the Black Death moved death to the forefront of the collective psyche" ("Abstract"). Killing twenty million lives, the disease "was so lethal some went to bed well and

died before morning," explains Mark Galli in his article "When a Third of the World Died" (qtd. in Cerofeci 2). Facing the threat of death on a daily basis has drawn the Middle Ages to the point when "No other epoch has laid so much stress as [this period] on the thought of death" (Huizinga qtd. in Cerofeci 2). Within this context, Chaucer has his fictional Pardoner tell a tale, encompassing fear of the current phenomenon:

> …Death went his way without a word.
> He's killed a thousand in the present plague,
> And, sir, it doesn't do to be too vague
> If you should meet him; you had best be wary.
> Be on your guard with such an adversary,
> Be primed to meet him everywhere you go. (Chaucer 250)

Indeed, "Chaucer could not have avoided being aware of the plague in his lifetime," argues Snell in "Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale and Pestilence in Late Medieval Literature" (qtd. in Cerofeci 4). The fact that Death is personified has emphasized how influential it is at the time of the Black Death. Not only does Chaucer directly refer to Death as an "adversary" present everywhere that one must be cautious against, but Chaucer also implicitly alludes to the Plague by the whole concept of pilgrimage, which "was a prime cause of spreading disease" (Snell qtd. in Cerofeci 4). The hidden gold, which evokes greed in the tale's three rioters, also indicates the Plague's impact, as if it has been buried by someone who unfortunately perished before the Plague ceased (Snell qtd. in Cerofeci 4). In fact, the Black Death, through the lense of "The Pardoner's Tale," has contributed greatly to the perception of death in the Middle Ages.

Death, in the Fourteenth century, bears an extremely close relationship with religion. It becomes the necessity for people to pay for their sins. In fact, many believed that "this catastrophe was a punishment from God for their sins" (Cerofeci 2). Acknowledging this notion, Chaucer lets his characters die in the "Pardoner's Tale" for their wickedness. Despite setting out to find and kill Death, as long as they find "a pile of golden florins on the ground," "no longer was it Death those fellows sought" (Chaucer 253). Here, greed has appeared as the first sin. Further tempted to possess the treasure alone, each man plots to kill the others. While the youngest poisons the wine, he is attacked and killed by the other two, who in return drink the poison, too die. Obviously, the three rioters die of their own sins, manifested by greed, cruelty and treachery: "O cursed sin! O blackguardly excess! / O treacherous homicide! O wickedness!" (256). Besides, right at the beginning of the tale, the Pardoner has depicted the rioters' indulgent lifestyle as a background supporting their sinful decisions:

> Of youngsters haunting vice and ribaldry,
> Riot and gambling, stews and public-houses
> Where each with harp, guitar or lute carouses,
> Dancing and dicing day and night, and bold
> To eat and drink far more than they can hold,
> Doing thereby the devil sacrifice
> Within that devil's temple of cursed vice,
> Abominable in superfluity,
> With oaths so damnable in blasphemy
> That it's a grisly thing to hear them swear. (244-245)

Denounced as false oaths, gambling and gluttony, the "tavern sins" are popular topics in medieval sermons. Listing nearly all the sins and putting the death as an end for the rioters, Chaucer has successfully mirrored the contemporary belief that death is the end to all wrongdoings. Taking a step further, Chaucer, through the voice of the Pardoner, mentions Christ as the saviour who "redeemed us with his blood," thus reinforcing the attitude that human damnation must be paid by death at all costs.

In addition to serving as a means to redeem sins, death in the Middle Ages is also heavily God-centered. In particular, nobody other than God has the power to grant death. This is strongly upheld by the Old Man's case:

> And so my age is mine and must be still
> Upon me, for such time as God may will.
> Not even Death, alas, will take my life. (251)

Indeed, death follows God's will, since no matter how hard the Old Man tries, "walk[ing] to India, searching round / Village and city on [his] pilgrimage," he still lives, "walk[s] alone and wait[s]" for the day to come. Moreover, should

“Jesu Christ, soul’s healer, aye, the leech/ Of every soul, grant pardon and relieve you / Of sin…” (251), death, as a continuity to afterlife, will lift up one soul to heaven, as noted in the Pardoner’s sermon, “With pardon for the lowly and the great/ When soul leaves body for the future state!” (257). In other words, telling a tale where death becomes the main theme, the Pardoner is trying to stress the importance of repentance and penance, which can guarantee one’s protection by God after death. In either case, whether death submits to God’s will or needs His protection, it highlights the role of God while simultaneously portraying a strongly religious-based society.

Turning away from the Middle Ages, the seventeenth-century writer Aphra Behn paints the tragic death of a slave, Oroonoko. No longer illustrating a death by the Plague in a God-centered nation, “Oroonoko” contains a totally different approach, bearing no religious mindset, but gearing towards a more humanistic view. Indeed, readers cannot see the role of God anywhere in the text, for the characters have utmost control over their lives. In other words, they decide to kill others and even themselves without any intervention other than their own free will. The King, Oroonoko’s grandfather, finds out Imoinda’s disobedience by the secret marriage with Oroonoko and immediately asserts his measures of revenge:

> Whereas before he designed to be himself her executioner, he now resolved she should not die. But as it is the greatest crime in nature amongst ‘em to touch a woman after having been possessed by a son, a father, or a brother, so now he looked on Imoinda as a polluted thing, wholly unfit for his embrace ... He therefore removes her from the Otan ... sold off as slaves to another country. (Behn 2328)

Apparently, the life of a human being, not to mention a woman, is so fragile that one order from the ruling class can easily take it away. While the King can execute Imoinda, he can decide not to and choose a different method of punishment instead. It is also this man that determines the sins of others, as he considers Imoinda a worthless contaminated object that must be expelled from his territory. Painting a ruthless king who rules with biased emotions, Behn has implicitly underlined the culture of her time, when death looms for no good reason. This is also the case of Oroonoko (Caesar), who, in captivity as a slave, is tied to the stake, dismembered and burnt to death at the command of the ruthless Irishman Banister following Deputy Governor Byam’s behest:

> Banister ... forcibly took Caesar, and had him carried to the same post where he was whipped; and causing him to be tied to it, and a great fire made before him, he told him he should die like a dog ... The executioner came, and first cut off his members, and threw them into the fire; after that, with an ill-favored knife, they cut his ears, and his nose, and burned them ... then they hacked off one of his arms… (Behn 2358)

Whether it is the King or the colonial government, with their power, they callously play with the fate of commoners, turning them into puppets to act out their commands, or simpler, just to please their wish. Indeed, God is no longer the force to whom folks pray to change their fate, since He has been completely replaced by the brutal force of inhumane people. Religion has stepped down from its used-to-be glorious throne.

One may well ask whether the rioters in “The Pardoner’s Tale” also have the right to kill one another, not only the governors in “Oroonoko.” However, it is crucial to note that those rioters die of their own sins; the murder was prompted by greed and inhumanity. In stark contrast, “Oroonoko” portrays the collapse of justice. Should death of sin from the Middle Ages still exist in the seventeenth century, it is the King and the colonists who should have died for their wicknedness, not the innocent Oroonoko and Imoinda. Indeed, Aphra Behn has clearly drawn a line between the good and evil by meticulously describing the antagonists’ evilness from mental process to their actual actions. As regards the King, “he was troubled for having been forced by an irresistible passion to rob his son of a treasure he knew could not but be extremely dear to him, since she was the most beautiful that ever had been seen […] with a charm of wit surpassing all” (Behn 2321). Disregarding conscience, he still forces “her lovely person” to be exposed to “his withered arms,” highlighting his willingness to give in to sexual desires and above all, to act evil. The deeds of the colonists, however, are even malicious:

> When they thought they were sufficiently revenged on him, they untied him, almost fainting with loss of blood from a thousand wounds all over his body, from which they had rent his clothes, and led him bleeding and naked as he was, and loaded him all over with irons; and then rubbed his wounds, to complete their cruelty, with Indian pepper, which had like to have made him raving mad… (Behn 2352)

True, Imoinda and Oroonoko does not do anything wrong, but they still suffer tortures from the governors. Inherently, sin is no longer a factor leading to death. It is the ruling class that decides. Social hierarchy, then, has replaced justice.

The stronger wins, not the righteous. After all, “Oroonoko” has best reflected a shift towards realism in the seventeenth century, as characterized by a total absence of religious values.

Distinct from the Black Death when death must come as a destiny, Oroonoko’s death actively voices a bold protest to the colonial system in England two hundred years ago. Asserting death on the lower class as a solution to its rebellion, the colonists have turned death itself into a suppression tool, staging death to maintain their profit and power. Oroonoko’s death, in the end, is manifested by Byam’s command, who decides to burn Caesar to end any threat he may pose to the colonial government. In fact, Caesar himself has used death as an escape from this cruel world, killing his wife and ultimately committing suicide. Realizing that he has been deceived by Trefry’s promise of freedom, Oroonoko and other slaves run away from the plantation, only to be captured and betrayed once again:

> Trefry ... took [Oroonoko] aside and persuaded him, even with tears, to live, by surrendering himself, and to name his conditions. Caesar was overcome by his wit and reasons ... and they surrendered to the governor, who walked peaceably down into the plantation with ‘em ... But they were no sooner arrived at the place where all the slaves receive their punishment of whipping ... in a most deplorable and inhuman manner, rendering the very flesh from their bones… (Behn 2352)

Only at this time does Oroonoko become fully aware of Byam’s treachery. To put an end to lifelong sufferings, he, “with a hand resolved and a heart-breaking within, gave the fatal stroke” to Imoinda, then committed suicide, “ripp[ing] up his own belly” (Behn 2355, 2357). Forced to find death, Oroonoko has proven the initative and will power of human beings which underscore humanism in the modern days, as sharply contrasting the prevalent unconditional submission in the medieval period.

Besides the lack of religion, the death in “Oroonoko” also elevates the theme of realism through its form and language, thus revealing some unique social features at that time. Not telling the story in the parable form like “The Pardoner’s Tale,” “Oroonoko” bears witness to a historical figure, as Behn expresses right at the first few lines of her work:

> I do not pretend, in giving you the history of this royal slave, to entertain my reader with the adventures of a feigned hero, whose life and fortunes fancy may manage at the poet’s pleasure; not in relating the truth, design to adorn it with any accidents but such as arrived in earnest to him ... there being enough reality to support it, and to render it diverting, without the addition of invention. (Behn 2313)

Emphasizing her honesty in reporting a true story by trenchantly denouncing common pleasure of other poets who weave unreal heroism into their works, Behn has captured readers’ belief in the authenticity of “Oroonoko,” thus, thanks to this true narrative, granting them the chance to learn about English history when “wives have a respect for their husbands equal to what any other people pay a deity, and when a man finds any occasion to quit his wife, if he loves her, she dies by his hand; if not, he sells her, or suffers some other to kill her” (Behn 2355). Realism, again, dominates the story, forming a rational base behind each character’s action, as seen in Oroonoko’s killing his wife, which is perfectly acceptable in the seventeenth-century England. Moreover, Behn’s detailed but violent language also marks an enormous departure from the plain image of death in the medieval days. When the rioters die, they simply do:

> Concerning poison and its operation,
> Trust me, no ghastlier section to transcend
> What these two wretches suffered at their end.
> Thus these two murderers received their due,
> So did the treacherous young poisoner too. (Chaucer 256)

The simple death embodied in “The Pardoner’s Tale”, however, clashes modern literature, a time that values extreme details. With a series of down-to-earth portraits “Ripp[ing] his own belly, and [taking] his bowels and pull[ing] ‘em out ... he was now so altered that his face was like a death’s head blacked over, nothing but teeth and eyeholes” (2357), Behn has evoked extreme horrors that cannot be better expressed. Departing from the old attitude in which “death appears inert and static,” Behn offers too marked a contrast where death becomes frightful to the fullest extent (Aries 13).

3. Conclusion

Looking at death in itself has sufficed to suggest the shift from the romantic and God-based mindset of the Medieval times to the realistic and humanistic modern world in the seventeenth century. That is to say, England has gone a long way in rectifying its interpretations about death to become a truly civilized Western society as we see today. Indeed, the path to death is not easy at all; people die, but they still live in resounding interpretations!

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