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Death in Fiction

Death by definition is nothing but the “permanent cessation of all biological functions that sustain a living organism.” However, in literature and contemporary media, death has a multitude of interpretations ranging from glory to grief, from fear to fascination. For example, in his book *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark: the Complete Collection*, Alvin Schwartz presents death as a frightening, inevitable, brutal aspect of life. On the other hand, death is romanticized as a heroic sacrifice in the popular Marvel movie, *Avengers: Endgame* as well as the *Harry Potter Series* by J. K. Rowling. Meanwhile, Emily Dickinson in her poem, *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, focuses on the mystery of life after death and presents it as a motivation to live a more fulfilling life. Thus, literature has varying approaches to death affecting both the characters and the storyline itself. Death in fiction forms a powerful tool which is utilized by authors to advance their plots and symbolize change or transition.

The most common interpretation of death- that is its association with fear, loss, grief and pain- is seen in works of horror. Horror expounds and exploits the anxiety associated with death. Many horror films and TV shows rely on the violence and brutality of death to unnerve their audience. The theme of horror often explores the topic of death as something transformative and unpredictable- it presents death as an ever-existing possibility which is unmindful, implacable, and remorseless. One can say that works of horror reinforce the inevitable truth of life which is death. For example, in his book, *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark: the Complete Collection*,

aimed at children, the author Alvin Schwartz wrote “don’t you ever laugh as the hearse goes by, for you may be the next to die” (Schwartz and Gammell). Schwartz bluntly communicates the reality that is death which everyone inevitably goes through one day. He uses the ambiguity associated with death i.e. the fear of the unknown, which lies at the core of most horror novels and films, to spook his audience. Though the book is aimed at children, it does a good job of building suspense and mystery through the theme of death to placate the thrill-seeking minds of its readers. At the beginning of his book, Schwartz writes, “Telling scary stories is something people have done for thousands of years, for most of us like being scared in that way. Since there isn't any danger, we think it is fun.” (Schwartz and Gammell). This shows that Schwartz’s audience is reading the book to be deliberately scared. It is the mysterious, gruesome nature of death that Schwartz exploits to get the reaction that he wants from his audience. Schwartz also talks about storytelling and how presentation plays an important role in setting the atmosphere, when he says, “And the best time to tell these stories is at night. In the dark and the gloom, it is easy for someone listening to imagine all sorts of strange and scary things.” (Schwartz and Gammell).

Juxtaposed to how death is often treated in the genre of horror- daunting, superior, and beyond human control- there are countless works that reduce the element of terror associated with death by attaching themes of heroism and self-sacrifice to it. Benevolent suicide refers to the self-sacrifice of one's own life for the sake of the greater good. The idea of willingly facing death, not in simple self-defense, but in the name of an ideal, looks both courageous and reckless. Cinema has often used this concept to deliver a gut-wrenching climax in the form of an emotional sacrifice that generates admiration and bewilderment in the audience.

A popular example would be the death of Iron Man in *Avengers: Endgame*, which makes for one of the most heartbreaking moments of the entire film. The Golden Avenger offers up the ultimate sacrifice when he decides to prioritize other people's happiness over his own. Completely aware of his chances of survival, of the risks and the consequences, the character still decides to face his destiny which results in a heroic and memorable sacrifice. Here, death is not treated as a tragedy- having experienced the fulfillment of a peaceful life with family and loved ones, the character takes reign of his fate and willingly faces death. The manner of his death is such that he finds fulfillment in his end as well; replacing the emotions of grief that the audience might feel with sentiments of consolation. As the screenwriters put it- "It's a good death. It doesn't feel like a tragedy. It feels like a heroic, finished life." (Itzkoff).

Another popular example of a selfless sacrifice is Dobby's death in *Harry Potter: The Deathly Hallows* by J.K. Rowling. Though Dobby's death was less of an explicit choice, it was a proud one nonetheless as he instinctively sacrifices himself to save Harry. The same feelings of admiration are evoked on Dobby's courageous sacrifice; however, unlike the case of Iron Man- it cannot be said that his death was completely without tragedy. Dobby's character signified the abused, the discriminated, the one who was truly innocent and the one who was wronged without having done any wrong. While the death of Tony Stark can be termed as a satisfactory end to a fulfilled life, the death of Dobby falls in the opposite category. Thus, for some, this death signifies an irrevocably innocent soul being murdered. However, regardless of whether one views Dobby's death as a voluntary sacrifice of a friend for another or the murder of an innocent soul out of spite, fact remains that the character's end was particularly devastating as it was the one time that he could not do what Harry wanted him to do: stay alive.

It is interesting to note- along with Dobby's death- the many varying interpretations of death offered by J.K. Rowling in her popular franchise. Dumbledore's death served as the loss of all visible hope; Hedwig's death represented the end of Potter's childhood while Fred's death was characteristic of his own nature as he faced his end laughing in the face of death. Rowling acknowledges the significance the topic of death plays in her work as she says- "My books are largely about death. They open with the death of Harry's parents. There is Voldemort's obsession with conquering death and his quest for immortality at any price, the goal of anyone with magic. I so understand why Voldemort wants to conquer death. We're all frightened of it." (Stephen M. Silverman Updated January 10 and Silverman)

Death, in the form of self-sacrifice, is just one of the many examples of how the concept is romanticized in literature. Many works of literature adopt the view that 'death is not the opposite of life, but the counterpart to birth' and associate freedom and salvation with death. The work of Emily Dickinson- one of the most important figures in American poetry - sheds a great deal of light on the romanticization of death. Having written more than 500 poems on the subject of death, Dickinson was preoccupied with this theme throughout her life. Dickinson's poems often personify death in various characters- as a coachman, a cunning courtier, a king, a democrat, a lover, a murderer, a wild beast, a frost, a brutal killer, etc. For example, in her poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," Dickinson personifies death as the Grim Reaper who casually waits for her to finish her activities (life). She views death as the end of the worldly life and the beginning of eternity. In the first stanza of the poem, Dickinson says "Because I could not stop for Death – He kindly stopped for me –The Carriage held but just Ourselves – And Immortality" (Dickinson). She represents death as the commencement of immortality. Literature is often looked upon as a source of comfort; a place of solace that draws the reader away from

the complexities of the real world to a fictional world where daunting subjects like death are diluted into something more digestible. Thus, it is no surprise that authors like Dickinson represent death as salvation and just the beginning to an eternity.

In conclusion, the theme of death is truly timeless. It has been explored in varying forms and contexts across different mediums and genres with almost every imaginable interpretation. Sometimes it is moving, other times it is intimidating. Sometimes it is associated with grief and pain, other times with courage and love. Sometimes it is represented as the beginning of something new, other times as the end. Sometimes it is given due significance, other times it is treated with indifference. However, regardless of the genre and the interpretation, it is apt to say that the concept of death is one that transcends time and will continue to enamor our minds and ignite our curiosity.

Sources

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