

When Life Shuts Doors, Death Opens Windows: Oxymoronic (Re) Presentation of Death in Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology*



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ABSTRACT: The mystery of death still remains uncovered in human cultures. However, many believe death is continuity of life. The artistic (re)presentation of death in American poetry sparks off interest in this study. Interestingly, a well-known “death” poetess Emily Dickinson, in her versatile depictions of death, paradoxically was able to establish it as an initiation into immortality. However, no poet was known to offer such contradictory perspective of death as Edgar Lee Masters. His *Spoon River Anthology*'s epitaphs offer room to construe life in a small community as shutting its inhabitants' mouths whereas death opens it for them to “finally” express themselves. Through an African reader perspective with multiple colonial minds, this study digs for meaning(s) of a life under pressure in a liberator death environment.

KEYWORDS: death, epitaphs, life, paradox, Western.

INTRODUCTION

Life and death are the two most important stages of human life. While Fuchs presents death a negative experience which occurs in the human existence, Epicurus advises to consider it as nothing. For Fuchs, “Death is the most negative, darkest, most absurd side of existence” (Fuchs, 2020, p. 318). Death is viewed in this way as an absurdity. The superlative and the repetition used in this statement heighten the scholar's consideration of death. To nullify or belittle the biological end of human existence, Epicurus claims: “Death is nothing to us. For while we are still alive, death is not present; and when death is present, we are not” (Epicurus quoted in Draper, 2004, p. 92). If ever death is nothing to us, it will be difficult if life does not give us anything promising. In an attempt to gainsay the Epicurean philosophy of death, Gray clarifies: “The first requirement in becoming aware of death as a possibility of increase of being is to recognize that death is always and ever my own, something that belongs to my very essence, as Nothingness belongs to Being” (Gray, 1951, p. 119). In point of fact, when life does shut all possible door upon someone, the inevitable will be opened by death. As a matter of fact, once “we learn to grasp the reality of death as life's greatest possibility, we shall not simply await it passively as a passing away of a biological sort, nor brood over it, nor desire to hasten its coming” (p. 119). Once a person is alive, he or she has to take death as life's greatest possibility. Thus, if one is incapable of achieving some peace or freedom in life, he or she might get it in death.

With a multiple colonial mind from an African reader, this study investigates a life under pressure in a liberator death environment. Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* “in the first years after publication was altogether the most read and most talked of volume of poetry that had ever been written in America” (Boynton, 1922, p. 612). Masters' dynamism in creating a platform for the dead to speak makes this book unique in time. The anthology's message of the dead is crystal-clear. The dead people were hindered to speak the truth in their lifetime. However, death enables them speak fearlessly the truth untold to enlighten the living. Of course, death is inevitable. If there is one thing that people often dread, it is the issue of death. Life's significance relies in the sense that we all will one die. But with this consciousness, people tend to develop death phobia.

In this perspective, this study creates room for death positivity. The term ‘death positivity’ represents an important strategy to grapple with death. This term was popularized by Caitlin Doughty as a play on the term sex positive. The new movement encourages people to speak openly about death, dying, and corpses. As a matter of fact, “[d]eath is not taboo, it is experienced in public and in private, in medical and academic institutions, and it is explored alongside science in anatomy museums, in popular publication and in scholarly studies which have extended across many subject areas for forty years” (Sayer, 2010, p. 488). From this statement, it is obvious that death is not a taboo, meaning it occurs in every aspect of human life. Simply, the movement purports to eliminate the silence around death-related topics, decrease anxiety surrounding death.

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1. Living In Front of Death

The concept of death can longer be new. Throughout history, many people have experienced death and today more individuals are dying. Not only do human beings die, but animals and trees also do die. This casts death as an unavoidable phase of life. Consequently, death is inevitable. Reading Solomon's Ecclesiastes from the Bible testifies death's inevitability: "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted" (Ecclesiastes 3: 1). Solomon reveals temporality through this wonderful poem. The oxymoronic expressions in this quote strongly stress the inevitability of death. The reader can notice the repetition of "time" and the poet's use of gradation which emphasize the fact that nothing will ever remain eternal. Therefore, it is of an absolute fact that when someone is born, he or she will inevitably die at a given time. No one will ever escape death though. We can obviously comprehend with this biblical passage that with time all being will transcend this physical realm. That is the reason why people have to know that

death is not necessarily a difficult social topic; the public do not need to be protected from the ancient dead nor are they afraid of them. Indeed, individual explorations of personal mortality can be facilitated in one of the few places where it is possible to experience a corpse. This interaction may be as simple as wondering what happens to your own body after death or what a 'real' skeleton looks like. (Sayer, 2010, p. 488)

The quote states a clear factor about how death needs to be addressed in order to get free from the physical realm. Transcendentalists like Heidegger and Jaspers also disappeared in this physical world. The ephemeral lifetime of humans on earth is vindicated in their death. If the power-described Jesus also had to die, it is crystal-clear that nothing or nobody will resist this unescapable Sword of Damocles.

In point of fact, humans need to consider death as part of themselves. The same way people are born into life, they will similarly die. It is an obvious part of human existence. In the existentialist standpoint, human existence is temporal and only accepting this fact can free people from the fear of death. Interestingly enough, Martin Heidegger submits: "If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life – and only then will I be free to become myself" (quoted in Breitbart, 2018). A close reading of this statement demonstrates reveals that there is freedom in accepting the ideology of death. Acknowledging or accepting death as part of human existence is a vital step toward the freedom of the self. The self cannot and will never be relieved from that anxiety of knowing that one will die one day if there is no sense that death stands as an inevitable stage of human existence.

In this way, life cannot be mentioned if there is no sense of death. That is, if we do not die, we might not even know that we are alive. Precisely, life is defined in the fact that the individual can also die. In the same perspective, in "The Idea of Death in Existentialism," J. Glenn Gray explains:

Living in the face of death then means living in such fashion that life can be broken off at any moment and not be rendered meaningless by such accident. We do not as genuine persons put the goals of our life somewhere in the future and make their attainment the measure of life's meaning. Meaningful living, for the existentialists, requires to be conceived not in terms of completion or in terms of duration, but rather in terms of an intensification and clarification of life's possibilities from moment to moment. (Gray, 1951, p. 122)

Human beings are defined in the terms of life and death. Therefore, one cannot accept one and leave the other. Masters' *Spoon River* is a profound poetry of positivizing death. The poet's artistic invention showcases the intelligence of making the dead speak through epitaphs. As a matter of fact, the opening poem "The Hill" points to how death cannot be avoided. The poem starts by alluding to ten persons who bit the dust. The first half stand for male individuals. These men are named as Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley. All this five people experienced different deaths which transpire through the speaker's sparse use of language. The poet repeats the same scenario with five women, namely Ella, Kate, Mag, Lizzie and Edith in the third stanza. The poet's use of enumeration and repetition is a strong indication to the reader about the inevitability of death. Interestingly, the poem concludes with the description of Fiddler Jones, one of the best-known characters in the anthology, who does not use his musical talent to gain wealth.

In the first stanza, the poet uses both euphemism and metaphor of all these men "are sleeping on the hill" (p. 87). Both figures of speech showcase the speaker's consideration of death. It is equaled to the fact of sleeping but on the hill. Sleeping stands for death. More importantly, the use of the present progressive denotes the eternal continuation of death. This means that once a person is dead, he or she travels into no-end city, a city where the dead will eternally rest in peace. The second line of the first stanza enumerates the various personalities. In fact, whether weak or strong, all people will and must take the adventure of death. The anaphora of "one" and the repetition of "sleeping" used in the second stanza strongly suggests that all types of persons will one way or the other die. Surprisingly, the poet decides to use the same stylistic invention with the female characters.

In a way, the reading of "The Hill" reveals the vulnerability of every human being. All the characters alluded to in the poem die in some way or the other. This is a demonstration that whether one likes it or not, death will irresistibly embrace them. Obviously, nobody has ever resisted death to the point of absolutely refusing to die. In my viewpoint, the only way to resist death lies in refusing to be born. Therefore, if a spirit – referring to a person – is dominated by life, he or she has to know that he or she

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will also be defeated by death. It is only by recognizing this an unavoidable stage of human existence that one can be able to fully profit from life in the physical realm. This consciousness can probably purge people's fear of kicking the bucket. In a world full of injustice suspending on the head of the miserable person as a sword of Damocles, death can be the only option for freedom. As a matter of fact, most of the characters in Masters' *Spoon River* have been killed. This might be considered as murder. However, I think that the murderers offer them opportunity to voice out the flaws and sicknesses of their community. And this makes them immortal.

2. Metaphysical Communication between the Dead and the living

Death as cessation of the biological functioning of the body is not actually the end of the individual. I believe this is the reason why Seneca claims that suicide is something good. In "Seneca on Death and Immortality", Anna Lydia Motto states: "Suicide is an essential ethical factor in the moral doctrines of Seneca because it assures that complete freedom of the human soul on which his philosophy laid so much stress" (p. 187). This is a proof that this philosopher believes in human immortality after. I do not intend to encourage suicide in this study. But one needs to consider Masters' intelligent creation of a world in which the living persons' voice are silenced. And it is only in death that their voice can be heard through the epitaphs on each grave. Masters suggests through this artistic creation that humans continue to live even after death. His "The Hill" represents a window into this reality. The reader encounters different characters with different personalities, male and female who are sleeping peacefully on the hill. This image speaks volumes of the continuance of life even after the biological cessation of human life.

Even though Christian Fuchs tries to demonstrate the impossible communication of the dead to the loved one in "Death and Love: The Metaphysics of Communication", Masters makes this possible in his created *Spoon River* village. Fuchs in his effort to convince the reader claims:

The dead cease to live, and so, to communicate. Death means infinite silence and infinite non-communication. We can speak to the dead in thought, at their graves, at memorials, at funerals, and days of remembrance, etc., but they do not hear us and they cannot answer. The impossibility to continue to communicate with dead loved ones, to continue to experience them, to see and feel them and share the world with them via the social relations that are kept up by communication, form the source of mourning. (p. 326)

Contrarily, reading *Spoon River* convinces the readership of that interaction between the dead and the living. Masters lets us discover that it is not always the living that do communicate the living. And that there can be some communication between the dead and the living. In actual fact, there is a continual interaction between those who are no more with those who are on the land of the living. One palpable example is that *Spoon River*'s reader is still interacting with Masters even though this poet had died on March 5, 1950. We are still entertaining ourselves with the ideas of this important figure in American literature. The living people cannot totally disconnect with the dead one. There is still that metaphysical communication between both worlds. To this end, the most valuable document in America, namely *The Declaration of Independence* was written by the founding fathers who are no more in this physical realm. But their ideas enshrined in this document are quoted by most people not only in America but across the globe today. This situation will continue across generation. I believe Masters portrays this possible interaction. For example, he uses apostrophe to draw the passerby's attention in "Armanda Barker". The speaker says: "Traveler, it is believed in the village where I lived / That Henry loved me with a husband's love" (p. 95). The apostrophe in this poem makes clear that the dead is confessing some truth with everyone who reaches that level. Even though, there is no visible person, the poet makes possible the interaction between the buried person and the living person.

In other respects, if one considers human immortality to be irrelevant, then the conception of human as three-party is faulted. If this belief that humans are composed of spirit, soul, and body is verified, then after the cessation of the body the other parts should continue the journey. Until now, it is clear that a spirit cannot just die as a goat can die. Nor can the soul die as a bird. Probably, there should be a continuation of life with the human's spirit and soul. In my country, there is a serious consideration of the continuation of life after this biological death. At the burial of dead corpse, it is recurring to see people putting some coins into the coffin or some fabric in the grave. After one this serious burial ceremony, when asked the significance of these gift to the dead person, elders of the village often reply shockingly. For the performers of this ceremony, the dead person is undertaking a very long and endless journey. And probably, the dead could be thirsty, hungry or cold. As a matter of fact, the coins are given in order to allow them to buy some water on the road. The fabric could help cover himself or herself. This practice demonstrates the strong belief in immortality. Even though, the body is no longer lively, the person still lives when with regard to this practice.

As a matter of fact, it was this practice that kick off Birago Diop's "Sighs". As an African writer, Diop's poem is a meditation on the immortality of the dead. From an African reader's perspective, there is a mystery about death in Africa. Dead ancestors are never considered dead. They are never separated from the daily businesses of people. In most African villages, graveyards are not taken for granted. You will always see people performing ceremonies – pouring libation is an example – to their dead ancestors. This carries a profound importance in the traditional Africa. It is a fact that nothing happens in a vacuum. In this way, the convocation of the dead and prayers made to them have to be critically considered. Birago Diop's "Sighs" summarizes

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African consideration of the dead. The speaker uses anaphora and repetition to portray this. For the speaker, one can hear the dead in the nature. Let us read the first stanza:

Hear more often things than beings,
The voice of the fire listening,
Hear the voice of the water.
Hear in the wind
The bushes sobbing,
It is the sigh of our forebears.

We can eventually hear the dead's voice through fire, water (river), wind, and bush. The images used here allude to nature. From the African perspective, one can commune with the dead through nature. And the poet's repetition of "The dead are not dead" at the end of the last two stanzas emphasizes this possible interaction with the dead through nature. In the words of Christian Fuchs,

Death is at the same time ultimate alienation, but as an estrangement is also strange to itself, since it escapes sublation and appropriation: the dead person cannot be brought back to life. Death is *endstrangement*, the estrangement of mind, body, experience, consciousness, action, communication, social relations, and community without end. Thomas Nagel does not use the terms estrangement and alienation but yet shows that death robs humans of the opportunities for the practice and realisation of and struggles for the good life. (Fuchs, 2020, p. 332)

For this critic though, death kills the mind, body, experience, consciousness, action, communication, and social relations. But from the African viewpoint, one needs to reconsider the communication side. Death should not always be considered as the uttermost suppression of human existence. Given that there many circumstances whereby the living can interact with the dead, death can therefore be another window into the world of freedom where everything can be said without hesitation.

3. Death as a Liberator

Even if death "is not an everyday experience of human beings but a tragedy, absurdity, and futility, which breaks into everyday life to shatter it" (p. 319), one might see a liberating power of death. This liberating side of death transpires in the various poems of *Spoon River Anthology*.

According to the philosopher and psychologist Ernest Becker, "[t]he idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destination of man... primates were not bothered by the fear of death" (Becker, 1973, p. xvii). Becker uses the word 'fear' to demonstrate the extent to which death is highly considered by the human race. The fear of death characterizes the human nature. In the point of fact, the philosopher contrasts the human animals with primates. The latter are biologically considered to be closer to humans. However, it is obvious that the human species are more conscious of death than the animals. If the philosopher uses one example of animals, it means that he metonyms animals. Since it is a fact with the primates, it can be clearly inferred that this is also true with other animals. In actual fact, most people do fear death. This sense of leaving the physical really represents a nightmare. Even though many people are desperate when they are confronted with a situation where death is inherent, they might fight back. The fear of death is a fact and no evidence is needed before convincing somebody about it.

In a way, Masters' imaginary Spoon River intends to demystify death. It is obvious that making the dead speak represents the beauty of his artistic creation. Masters' anthology demystifies death in the sense that the dead are allowed to communicate again to the living bodies. In real life, this is beyond reason. In my country, there is a belief that the dead still communicate with the living people. But I think this needs to be revisited because if only this is to be a truth, I have to hear some pieces of advice from my grandmother who died many years. People of such conviction might think me wrong but the question why do traditionalists need to perform some meaningless ceremonies before admitting they have heard some words from the dead to deliver to the living. Now, the beauty about *Spoon River Anthology* is that Masters uses epitaphs to voice out the dead's confession which might speak volumes their deeds on the land of the living. Masters' intelligence lies in the fact that he does raise the dead in order to confess but rather through epitaphs which are always written after that the person is buried. For me, the good news is that these epitaphs are proofs that those bodies cocooned in the graves are freer than they were in life.

The poem "Hod Putt" showcases Masters' positivist conception of death. Individuals do not need to be scared when it comes to the notion of death. Actually, it is a stage which is mandatory for every living being. In this poem, the speaker confesses the crime he committed while wanting to get rid of poverty and toil. The line reads: "Myself grown tired of toil and poverty" (p. 89). It is the speaker's predicament in the village that jumpstarted his ambition to rob. As it is always believed, "a hungry man is an angry man." Hod's perpetual hunger due to his poverty led him to commit a death crime. The speaker saw Old Bill and others who grew wealthy. He says: "And beholding how Old Bill and others grew in wealth" (p. 89). It is cumbersome to see someone grow in wealth in the same community in which one lives and you are growing in poverty and sufferings. It is not fair because everyone born into a community has to profit from the goods of the land. However, when at the same you are suffering some people are

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luxuriously enjoying their lives. In fact, it is because the village has denied the speaker of its riches that he: Robbed a traveler one night near Proctor's Grove, / Killing him unwittingly while doing so" (p. 89). Consequently, he was "tried and hanged" (p. 89).

No robber knows the danger he is running into while robbing. This act might lead to death. That is why the poet makes the arrangement so that the speaker can kill the traveler. He could succeed in robbing this person without killing him. But Masters has decided that the person being robbed be killed in order to amplify his message. The speaker's crime proves that many people from this village are impoverished. This means that the important part of the village population is put in such poor conditions. That is the reason why they toil and work hard but they gain nothing to get of their poor condition. The only way out is to do something that can liberate them. In this case, a search for death is the solution for Hod. The speaker has tried many things to no avail. The only way out is therefore death because it ends the pains, toils, and poverty. The sense of death as a way to freedom is perceived in the last verse which reads: "Sleep peacefully side by side." Sleeping peacefully carries a strong message: death frees from all oppressions of life. In point of fact, "[y]ou must gain a vivid realization of death as a constitutive part of life, not as a mere end of life. Death is a phenomenon within life. If it is taken into life in a personal way, it will effect a revolution in our behavior. The fact of our mortality can properly be regarded as a fountain of possibility and potentiality" (Gray, 1951, p. 118). J. Glenn Gray suggests therefore that every human being should positively regard death. In this way, they can make full profit of the liberating power of death.

Besides, Masters' "Doctor Meyers" recounts summarily the life of Doctor Meyers. The latter was a nobleman and goodhearted. But he was falsely accused of murdering some miserable poetess: "And then one night, Minerva, the poetess, / Came to me in her trouble, crying. / I tried to help her out — she died" (p. 110). Obviously, Minerva came for help. Even though, the speaker does not mention the kind of help that she wanted, I believe it was a serious situation which needed a real assistance because the speaker testifies that she came in trouble and she was crying. The use of the gerund demonstrates the continuance of her trouble. Maybe the poetess was in an agony. And the only place to find peace is in her death in the man's house. This situation dramatizes injustice in the village. There was no serious investigation before the indictment of the poor victim. In point of fact, the speaker states: "They indicted me, the newspapers disgraced me, / My wife perished of a broken heart. / And pneumonia finished me" (p. 110). The false accusation heavily disgraced the reputation of the noble person. Consequently, his wife died and finally he followed his wife due to a pneumonia. The verb 'finish' used showcases something that started. In this perspective, one may infer that the doctor's predicament was started probably with injustice that dominated their society. One thing that the reader may notice is that the victim in this poem cannot defend himself because the village has shut their mouth. They are unable to speak the truth. In a place where people do not have the freedom of speech, living is therein difficult and often unbearable. Under normal circumstances, a doctor should not die of pneumonia because it can be quickly cured. Therefore, if Masters decides to finish the life of a doctor using that kind of sickness, this translates some complexity. Due to the false accusation, the doctor was dispossessed of his possession. The society in which he lives has shut the doors of riches or material possessions. As a result, the society has confiscated the doctor's entire possessions, making him speechless and poor until death opens up its door to lead him into prolonged freedom.

Another factual example shows in "Armanda Barker" where Masters portrays the hidden murder of a wife by her husband. Actually, Armanda Barker confesses the real source of her death. The cruelty of Henry is a fact in every human society. Some husbands are evil-incarnated to suffocate their wives. The speaker says: "Henry got me with child, / Knowing that I could not bring forth life / Without losing my own" (p. 95). Henry is informed of the wife's situation but he does not do anything to help save her. Masters' use of euphemism in the three line carries a deep sense. Given that the woman is talking about her husband, it is clear that she does not want to appear rude. You should bear in mind that those days, men were highly revered. You could feel that same reverence even after death. The dead who is confessing a crime committed against her still finds herself under the burden of oppression. Because of the oppressive attitude of the most villagers, she could not tell the hell she was going through when alive. She even confesses: "In my youth therefore I entered the portals of dust" (p. 95). This is another euphemism. This amplifies the implication she is psychologically influenced by the oppression she underwent in life. Had it not been death which freed her, she would not have gathered the courage to finally "proclaim from the dust / That he slew me to gratify his hatred" (p. 95). It is at the end of the poem that the reader can realize that the woman did not die naturally. Rather she was assassinated due to her husband's hatred. Thus, death is the only way through which Armanda could be freed from oppression and be able speak the truth.

CONCLUSION

Simply put, when life does not grant liberty, the inevitable option is death. Death frees most characters from oppression. This study has come up first with the idea that one should live in the face of death. Considering death as an inevitable stage can help make careful use of life. This might help consider others better because if I really know that I could die in an unpredictable moment, I could positively and kindly interact with my fellow who will also go through the same stage. All the wickedness around the world lies in the fact that people sometimes forget that they will die regardless of the amount of money they have in bank accounts or how many title deeds, cars, aircrafts that they possess. Even the highly protected people should know that irrespective of the number of

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military men, tanks and artilleries which they have under control, they will certainly die. This consciousness could help decrease the abuses of the miserable.

Moreover, one should consider the fact that living people cannot totally disconnect from the dead because interactions are possible between both the dead and the living. This interaction might be an eye-opening instance whereby living persons could some truth about life. This interaction might be intellectual and spiritual in the sense that living persons can read through the thoughts of the dead as recorded in books or art and even in the nature. Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* demythologizes death in the sense that a meditation on it can give people some freedom out of dystopian environments and in fatal circumstances. Even though the study positivizes death, it does not encourage people to commit suicide. Death is part of human existence. Therefore, discussing and accepting it should not be a taboo.

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