

Death During The Renaissance Era; A Teaching Tool Used To Promote The Acceptance Of Mortality

Sketch Outline

I. Introduction

- A. Concept of death and how it is viewed today
- B. View of death in the Renaissance Era
- C. Why it was such a hot topic.
- D. How writers portrayed death
- E. Thesis Statement

What: Sir Walter Raleigh's *The History of the World: Conclusion: On Death* and Thomas Nashe's *A Litany in Time of Plague* depict death as a "leveler". John Donne's *Holy Sonnet #10* portray death as a purifying agent.

So What: All three pieces of literature portray death as a teaching tool and promote the acceptance of death

II. Movement One - Death as a "leveler"

- A. *The History of the World: Conclusion: On Death*
- B. *A Litany in Time of Plague*
- C. Equalizes and unites all humans; good and evil, rich and poor
- D. Nobody can escape death
- E. Teaches about what is important in life
- F. Conclusion

III. Movement Two - Death as purification

- A. *Holy Sonnet #10*
- B. Some of Donne's views of death
- C. Concept of body and soul
- D. Eternal Life
- E. Comparison of *Holy Sonnet #10* with previous two pieces of literature
- F. Conclusion

IV. Conclusion

- A. Death used as a "leveler"
- B. Death as a purifying agent
- C. Death as a teaching tool used to promote the acceptance of death
- D. Writers did their jobs right and got their message across
- E. We too can learn from death's teachings

**Death During The Renaissance Era: A Teaching Tool Used To Promote The
Acceptance Of Mortality
Working Outline**

I. Introduction

- A. Concept of death and how it is viewed today
 - it is hard to grasp, both emotionally and physically
 - despite its name, it is alive and indestructible
 - seen as permanent end to life and is rarely discussed
- B. View of death in the Renaissance Era
 - had a "water cooler" effect on society, meaning it was an unavoidable topic
 - writers focused on the admirable aspects and qualities of death
- C. Why it was such a hot topic
 - death had an omnipresent quality in the form of religious executions and fatalities due to illness and the plague
 - religions seemed to change with the seasons and depended wholly on the religious beliefs of the current monarch as in the case of Queen Mary, a Catholic, and her Protestant half sister, Queen Elizabeth I
 - if your beliefs differed from that of the King, then you were persecuted and, more often than not, executed
 - writers used their work to help people accept death, not fear it
 - in his article, *Renaissance Death*, Donald W. Foster agrees that Renaissance literature "depleted the fear of death." (p. 24)
 - he goes on to point out that James Calderwood is able to "demonstrate that the denial of death is a fundamental and perhaps universal human activity," (p. 20) as it was in the Renaissance Era
- D. How writers portrayed death
 - many writers saw death as an agent of procreation, meaning that in order for new life to be created, existing life had to produce offspring and die to make room for its descendants
 - others argued that death justified martyrdom by allowing the soul to enter heaven
 - they felt that pain and suffering were forms of punishment for sin and a way of purification
 - in his work *The History of the World: Conclusion: On Death*, Sir Walter Raleigh depicted death as a "leveler"
 - he saw death as a means of equalizing humanity in a way that no other aspect of life was capable of doing.
 - similarly, Thomas Nashe's *A Litany in Time of Plague*, showed death as a unifying agent which humbled all humans into recognizing that they were all equal
 - John Donne's *Holy Sonnet #10*, however, portrayed death as a form

of purification, necessary to separate the soul from the body and to allow for eternal life

- while each piece of literature deals mainly with its own aforementioned concept, their ideas do intertwine, as will later be discussed

E. Thesis Statement

- Even though they mainly deal with separate aspects of death, upon careful comparison and detailed analysis of Raleigh's *History of the World: Conclusion: On Death*, Nashe's *A Litany in Time of Plague*, and Donne's *Holy Sonnet #10*, it can be concluded that they all incorporate death as a teaching tool used to promote death's acceptance.

II. Movement I - Death as a "leveler"

A. *The History of the World: Conclusion: On Death*

B. *A Litany in Time of Plague*

C. Equalizes and unites all humans; good and evil, rich and poor

- death was important to writers because they personified it
- they saw death as noble, mighty and powerful
- they gave it human qualities because it could unify humanity
- in a time when ethnic origin and personal wealth were the distinguishing factors between social classes, many writers, such as Sir Walter Raleigh and Robert Nashe, preached equality through death.
- they believed what could not be achieved in life, would certainly emerge in death
- Raleigh felt that the barriers amongst humanity would never be eliminated
- he believed that only death could achieve equality
- portrayed death as a "leveler," meaning an agent of equality, that could unify the rich and poor and the good and evil
- death takes a rich man and "proves him a beggar" and makes the beautiful see "therein deformity and rottenness"(p. 888)
- death destroys the very identity for which we strive in the course of our life
- death "hast drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two narrow words: Hic Jacet!"(p. 888)
- Nashe agrees, saying, "Rich men, trust not in wealth, Gold cannot buy you health"(ll. 8-9) and "Beauty is but a flower, Which wrinkles will devour"(ll. 15-16)
- Michael Neil, in *Issues of Death*, points out how Renaissance writers depicted death as a "sanction of last resort against the hubris of the over rich"(p. 14) and death's power to "degrade its victims"(p.14)

- goes on to say that massive death terminates the process of burial, the last possible hope of uniqueness or distinctiveness allotted to a mortal
- Raleigh wrote of people that "death humbles them at the instant; makes them cry, complain, repent, yea even to hate their forepassed happiness."(p. 888)

D. Nobody can escape death

- Neil remarks that the horror of death in early modern representation, was its "undifferentiating blankness"(p.14)
- Nashe points out that "none from [death's] darts can fly"(ll. 5) and that "swords may not fight with fate"(ll. 24)
- death makes no distinction between people
- it puts us all on an even playing field
- it makes man realize that his past is of no importance
- no matter how rich or beautiful he is, he cannot escape death

E. Teaches about what is important in life

- death makes man see that it is what is on the inside that counts and that after death has taken away his riches and beauty, he is stripped of his superiority and made to realize his equality with the rest of humanity
- Nashe - "Fond are life's lustful joys, Death proves them all but toys" (ll. 3-4)
- also says that "Wit with his wantonness, tasteth death's bitterness" (ll. 29-30)
- makes man see what is important in life
- life is not about possessions, status, and looks, but about how we went through life dealing with other people.
- when death catches up, it strips us of our wealth and beauty and compares us only on the basis of our conscience and actions
- it peels away the outer layer of skin to find out the truth of what is inside
- Raleigh - death makes man worry only about "the gravel that fills his mouth."(p. 888)
- makes man realize that his past possessions are of no use to him now that he is dying

F. Conclusion

- life can be seen as a test and death as the end result of how we fared
- Nashe wrote "Earth but a player's stage" (ll. 39)
- writers portrayed death as a "leveler" and taught the people to welcome death because it would unify them to a degree which could not be achieved on earth
- modern day writers agree with these views of death and feel that death teaches about life and the acceptance of mortality.
- in *Bearing the Dead*, Esther Schor acknowledges sameness before death and quotes Reverend William Newman saying, "Let us learn that

Death levels all ranks, making no distinctions.”(p. 226)

- they teach us that death can make us see the important things in life and show us, although a bit too late, the way to lead our life
- we should not fear death because it is good
- teaches that we are all equal and that we should get along with everyone

III. Movement Two - Death as Purification

A. *Holy Sonnet # 10*

B. Some of Donne's views of death

- Donne doesn't portray death as mighty, powerful, and noble
- however, he does think it is important, as he also personifies it
- he portrays it as weak and desperate because it “dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell” (ll. 10)
- we should not fear it because it is used by kings and desperate men
- even though death can affect us on earth, it will not be able to touch us in the afterlife because those who use death on earth will be equal to us after death
- they will not be able to use death to hurt us because we will have eternal life

C. Concept of body and soul

- Donne acknowledges that from death “much more must flow,”(ll. 6) meaning there is more to death than meets the eye
- he sees death as a purifying agent
- death delivers the soul from the body and separates the two entities
- the body is seen as the prison of the soul
- body is the driving force behind sin and evil; it is narrow minded, hears only what it wants to hear, and sees only certain things

D. Eternal Life

- a new beginning
- death allows the soul to escape from the body and gain eternal life
- Donne - “One short sleep past, we wake eternally”(ll. 13)
- death allows the soul to enter into heaven
- death can kill us on earth but we can gain eternal life
- death purifies us from our sins - through suffering, we are cleansed of our sins and our soul is purified

E. Comparison of *Holy Sonnet #10* to first two pieces of literature

- Raleigh also talks about repenting our sin and in doing so helping out the cleansing process
- we should refrain from sinning and repent while we are still on earth
- we will have to be purified anyway so we might as well start the process while we are on earth

- Nashe says that we should "Haste, therefore, each degree, To welcome destiny; Heaven is our heritage"(ll. 36-38)
- we should do everything we can to remain pure and increase our chances of entering into heaven

F. Conclusion

- don't fear death
- death is used to teach us to accept our mortality because it purifies us and allows us entrance into heaven
- we should be as pure on earth as possible
- death will not be able to touch us in our afterlife so we should not fear it

IV. Conclusion

- Death used as a "leveler"
 - it does not distinguish between people but kills everyone
 - nobody can escape it
 - you cannot buy your way out of death nor can you fight death
- Death as a purifying agent
 - separates the body and soul
 - purifies the soul through suffering
 - allows for the soul to enter into heaven
- Death as a teaching tool used to promote the acceptance of death
 - death teaches us about the important things in life
 - teaches us to accept death because it purifies and equalizes
 - allows for a new beginning and eternal life
 - we should not fear it; it has positive qualities
 - we should accept death and help out its role as a purification agent by repenting our sin and living our life in goodness
- Writers did their job right and got their message across
 - people ceased fearing death and started to accept it
 - Foster provides proof that people stopped fearing death in Michael Andrews' work,
 - Andrews points out that Mary Queen of Scots and Sir Walter Raleigh accepted death to the point where they "rehearsed for their respective deaths and performed their final roles with the dignity and eloquence of tragic heroes."(p. 9)
- We too can learn from death's teachings
 - accept death and talk about it more often
 - live our life free of wrongdoings
 - realize what is really important in life like family and friends
 - we can prepare ourselves for eternal life
 - we could understand it better