

ЛИТЕРАТУРОВЕДЕНИЕ
РАЗДЕЛ IV. ЛИТЕРАТУРА НАРОДОВ СТРАН ЗАРУБЕЖЬЯ

DOI: 10.18413/2313-8912-2018-4-1-63-69

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EFFECTS OF DEATH IN THE POETRY OF RUMI
AND WHITMAN

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Abstract. This paper is a minor part of my PhD dissertation “Elements of Sufism in the Poetry of Rumi and Whitman: A Comparative Study” in which the attempt has been made to find out the common elements of Sufism in the poetry of the two prominent Iranian and American poets (Molana Jalal al-Din Mohammad Balkhi known as Rumi and Walt Whitman, romantic poet), which one of them is the concept of death. Death is one of the world phenomena, which appears to have attracted poets and great writers’ thought in Iran and world literature. This paper looked into one of the significant issues of human intellectual life, which is death in their poems. They have interpreted death, such as life or another birth; which is not only painful and bitter but also poets are waiting to embrace and savor its sweetness. Rumi and Whitman's views of the death, sometimes are quite similar to each other and in some cases are different. This paper tried to use their famous poems to convey their thoughts.

Key words: death; Iran and World literature; Rumi; Whitman.

Introduction

Death is one of the world’s mysterious subjects in the nations of the world culture, which is placed in front of birth and apparently considers the end of the natural life of any living creature of the universe. From the day the man is born, fought to stay alive and stood in the face of death. However, his natural life didn’t have an end except death. There are many stories in world literature where people are looking for ideal lands without death. All have been tried to treat a pain which is apparently not therapeutic.

In all religions, special attention has been given to the subject of death; the followers of the divine religions according

to the teachings of their religion have accepted death as the divine order and heavenly destiny. They have tried to open a window from the death of the physical to the spiritual world. In this case, death and life are considered as part of being and help us to continue our life.

In the materialistic literature, death is the end of everything, because the physical body will decompose and destroy after death. However, the followers of the major religions such as Christianity and Islam don’t have such a view, although it may be to have the disagreement in some detail. In this article, the issue of the mysterious death will be compared

between Muslim (Rumi) and Christian (Whitman) poets.

One of the subjects which is dear to the heart of every Sufi is the idea of life and the opposite of that, which is death. For the contemplative like Rumi, death seems much more important than life. They tried to understand life through perceiving death. The lover's courage is one of the main characteristics of love. Love encouraged him to sacrifice himself, deny himself to be selfless. This selflessness is the right and deep meaning of death.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is an American romantic poet. Poetry in his opinion stems from the spiritual source and his view of the universe, creation, and death is spiritual and transcendent. As Aspiz puts it, "Death is a vital component of his gospel of universal brotherhood and sisterhood, of his luminous vision of the progressive unfolding of the human race (particularly its American component), and of his profound spirituality" (Preface). In some cases, Whitman is very close to Islamic- Iranian mysticism, as far as he regards the principle of Vahdat Al-Vojud (Unity of Being) in all parts of nature, and said, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (2007, p. 52).

In Whitman's view, death was not the negative part of life, but part of the natural world, which never ends; however, it is continuous. Death is the unity of nature and all. Although he was the poet of democracy and joys of life, but he had a keen interest in death. As he put in the Democratic Vistas: "In the future of these States must arise poets immense far, and make great poems of death" (Aspiz, 2004, p. 1). In his idea, modern poets should write about death. The condition of the

nineteenth century and Whitman's own experience represent the omnipresence of death in the life of the people of the United States. Many reasons show the high rate of mortality at that age. One of them is the epidemic plague of the century. The Civil War (1861-1864) is another factor for the rising of mortality in Whitman's age. The high rate of suicide among slaves who thought death may bring them freedom can be another one. Russ Castronovo stated that "The citizenship in nineteenth-century America was governed by an insidious 'necro ideology'" which he defined:

... a set of deathly effects specific to the nineteenth-century United States [which] eternalizes socio historical relations as neither social historical by conceptualizing the unmarked soul as refuge from the politicized body, idealizing the afterlife as a perfected social order, and representing passivity and somnolence as democratic virtues. (Frank, 2007, p. 4)

The nineteenth century was the time of mourning for Americans. Philippe Aries a French medievalist and historian refer to the nineteenth century as an "era of mourning" (1974, p.67) which the modern psychologists call "hysterical mourning" (1974, p.67). Hence, Whitman tried to make serious attempts in his writings to redirect people's attitude towards death.

Besides the cultural influence, Whitman's own experience due to the death of his grandmother, father, brother, sister-in-law, and the death of his mother, which he described as "the great dark cloud of my life" (Oliver, 2006, p. 5) is so much important. Moreover, the President Abraham Lincoln's death was a great nation's sorrow on that time. Whitman presented a series of lectures titled "The Death of Abraham Lincoln."

He devoted his work to reflect and interpret the concept of death. Before his death, he bought a lot in the cemetery of the city with a big tombstone, carrying his name. Furthermore, he added some poems to the 1881 edition of *leaves of Grass*, which is eventually called the “deathbed edition.” So, Whitman was so close to death, whether personally or nationally. Havelock Ellis said that Whitman “aspires to reveal the loveliness of death” (Aspiz, 2004, p. 111), and “speaks not only from the standpoint of the most intense and vivid delight in the actual world but possesses a practical familiarity with disease and death which has perhaps never fallen to the lot of a great writer” (Aspiz, 2004, p.111).

He declared: “I say better things about death than orthodoxy with all its boasts is say” (Aspiz, 2004, p. 2). In his poem “Scented Herbage of My Breast” he said: “Through me shall the words be said to make death exhilarating” (Whitman, 2007, p.134). Daniel G. Brinton confirmed Whitman’s poems are essentially songs of death, which is an essential part of the universe for him. Brinton, also, mentioned some factors that shaped Whitman’s concept of death:

Saturated as they are with the zest of life, marvelously sensitive as they are to every passing thrill of pleasure, to every glad sound or sight, they are essential paeans of Death. Whatever is, is of worth as part of the I, and only of worth as that I is immortal, is the defiant conqueror of Death and Time. This was no matter of tradition or education with Walt. It was the inevitable product of his genius, the logical result of his conception of man and the universe. Both, to him, were futile and worthless without the continuance of the mortal life

hereafter. This alone, to his mind, offered a rational cause for existence. Unless the individual survives the mutation of matter, the universe is purposeless. . . . To Walt it was the positive conclusion to the severest ratiocination. It is only with this thought constantly in mind that we can read the poems intelligently or sympathize with his acute love of life. (Aspiz, 2004, p. 2)

Whitman tried to represent death with so many images like Passageways, roads, gates, embouchures, twilight, autumn, leafless trees, etc. He tried to convince people that death is not the end of life, but an inevitable factor of the universe; he wrote, “I feel and know that death is not the ending, as was thought, but rather the real beginning” (Masters, 1968, p. 315). Walt Whitman is the celebrator of death and immortality, which his *Leaves of Grass* is the main source of this concept. It contains more than two hundred words and synonyms of death and mortality.

The views of two poets regarding death

Mystical death is sweet.

Mystical death is the one which is not only painful but also sweet and lovely. In this death, the body and the soul are separated and soul achieves the Divine Union. Rumi said: “All this dying is not the death of the (physical) form: this body is (only) like an instrument for the spirit” (Nicholson, 2011, *Mathnavi* V: 3821).

Whitman also referred to the sweetness of death and said: “In the day, in the night, to all, to each, / Sooner or later delicate death” (Whitman, 2007, p. 388). In another part, he addressed the death and said:

Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken
them I joyously sing the dead,

Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,

Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death. (Whitman, 2007, p. 389)

Whitman's poem entitled "A Song of Joys," praised life, its effects, and the various elements and referred to the separation of the body from the soul. At the end of his poem, not only referred to the joy of life but also the joy of death:

For not life's joys alone I sing, repeating – the joy of death!

The beautiful touch of Death, soothing and benumbing a few moments, for reasons,

Myself discharging my excrementitious body to be burn'd, or render'd to powder, or buried,

My real body doubtless left to me for other spheres,

My voided body nothing more to me, returning to the purifications,

Further offices, eternal uses of the earth. (Whitman, 2007, p.214)

It can be concluded that both poets have seen death from the spiritual and mystical view. In Rumi and Whitman's idea, death is a way to release the soul from the prison of the body. After the liberation of the soul, he will achieve the Divine Beloved. Hence, death is lovely and sweet.

Death is the rebirth of man:

Rumi considered death as the birth of the soul and his life in another world which the real one is:

I died to the inorganic state and became endowed with growth, and (then) I died to (vegetable) growth and attained to animal.

I died from animality and became Adam: Why, then, should I fear? When have I become less by dying?

At the next remove I shall die to man, that I may soar and lift up my head amongst the angels;

And I must escape even from (the state of) the angel: *everything is perishing except His Face.*

Once more I shall be sacrificed and die to the angel: I shall become that which enters not into the imagination.

Then I shall become non-existence: non-existence saith to me, (in tones loud) as an organ, Verily, unto Him shall we return. (Nicholson, 2011, *Mathnavi* III: 3901-06)

Whitman also expressed his optimistic view about death in section 7 of "Song of Myself." In his idea life is equal to death, and death is equal to birth. "Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?/ I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it./ I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not contain'd between my hat and boots" (Whitman, 2007, p. 57).

Like every Sufi, Rumi is the seeker of death:

I am an idle vagabond, seeking blows and desiring blows: do not seek rectitude from the vagabond on the road.

Not the one who cleaves to every shop; nay, but (the one who) springs away from (phenomenal) existence and strikes upon a mine (of reality).

Death and migration from this (earthly) abode has become as sweet to me as leaving the cage and flying (is sweet) to the (captive) bird. (Nicholson, 2011, *Mathnavi* III: 3947-51)

Rumi expressed the wisdom of death:

A certain man was saying, "The world would be delightful, were it not for the intervention of death."

The other said, “If there were no death, the tangled world would not be worth a straw.

It would be (like) a stack heaped up in the field and neglected and left unthreshed.

You have supposed (what is really) death to be life: you have sown your seed in a barren soil.

The false (discursive) reason, indeed, sees the reverse (of the truth): it sees life as death, O man of weak judgement. (Nicholaon, 2011, *Mathnavi* V: 1760-64)

Hence, Rumi considered death a means of wrapping up creation of the heaven, earth, and human, which is not destruction. He has brought the most beautiful form of the expression in the story of the baby into the fire who addressed his mother:

She was about to bow down before the idol (when) the child cried, “Verily, I am not dead.

Come in, O mother: I am happy here, although in appearance I am amidst the fire.

The fire is a spell that binds the eye for the sake of screening (the truth); this is (in reality) a Divine mercy which has raised its head from the collar (has been manifested from the

Unseen).

Come in, mother, and see the evidence of God, that thou mayst behold the delight of God's elect.

Come in, and see water that has the semblance of fire; (come away) from a world which is (really) fire and (only) has the semblance of water.

Come in, and see the mysteries of Abraham, who in the fire found cypress and jessamine.

I was seeing death at the time of birth from thee: sore was my dread of falling from thee;

(But) when I was born, I escaped from the narrow prison (of the womb) into a world of pleasant air and beautiful colour.

Now I deem the (earthly) world to be like the womb, since in this fire I have seen such rest:

In this fire I have seen a world wherein every atom possesses the (life-giving) breath of Jesus. (Nicholson, 2011, *Mathnavi* I: 785- 794)

Rumi analogized the transition from the mundane world to the spiritual one by transferring the child from the tight, and the dark womb to the vast and big world and implied that man won't be destroyed by death, rather he will step into the world much larger. He encouraged people not to fall in love with the dirty dishes of the mundane womb.

In part 6 of “Song of Myself”, Whitman described death as follows:

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,

And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,

And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,

And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier. (Whitman, 2007, p. 57)

For Rumi, death was not the end of life; it rather implies the birth of a new form of spiritual life. Whitman considered the reality of life after death by observing the “smallest sprout.” Death is not to arrests life; it rather leads to the resurrection, rejuvenation and renewal of life. The verse “The smallest sprout shows

there is really no death” represents Whitman’s reverence of death. The American Whitman believed no one really dies, “Nothing collapses,” death is the beginning of the new life. The body, the physical form dies, but the soul is immortal.

Whitman spoke not only of life but also death, which is the vital and key part of the cycle of life. In his idea, it is only through death, which the soul will be liberated to be united with the Ultimate and gain its purpose of existence.

“To Think of Time” is another poem, which represents immortality of the soul after death. In a room, a dead person laid on the bed and his family gathered around the corpse. Then poet started raising the following questions:

Have you guess’d you yourself
would not continue?

Have you dreaded these earth-
beetles?

Have you fear’d the future would
be nothing to you? (Whitman, 2007, p.
488)

In his view, as long as there is death, there must be a new life: “Not a day passes, not a minute or second without an accouchement, /Not a day passes, not a minute or second without a corpse”. Like Rumi, he equated life and death; the speaker in the poem suggests:

The breath ceases and the pulse of
the heart ceases,

The corpse stretches on the bed
and the living look upon it,

It is palpable as the living are
palpable. (Whitman, 2007, p.488-9)

After death, the soul can fly freely, he implied, “You are not thrown to the winds, you gather certainly and safely around yourself, /Yourself! yourself! yourself, for ever and ever!” (Whitman, 2007, p. 491).

Both poets didn’t consider death as the end of life. This subject among all nations has been accepted as a religious and popular belief. Humans always consider dead people alive.

The relationship between death and nature

Death is part of nature, as birth is part of it. Whitman and Rumi have emulated death with the natural rules. Whitman in “Song of Myself” referred to the grass; grass is the symbol of life-death cycle, which is always born. Grass cannot be permanently destroyed by death because grass is the handkerchief of the Lord.

In section 6 of “Song of Myself”, he referred to the child which his hands are full of grass, showed him and asked:

What is the grass? fetching it to me
with full hands;

How could I answer the child? I do
not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my
disposition, out of hopeful green stuff
woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of
the Lord,

A scented gift and remembrancer
designedly dropt,

Bearing the owner’s name
someday in the corners, that we may
see and remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child,
the produced babe of the vegetation.

In Persian literature, grass has unbreakable bound with life and death. In Whitman’s poetry, soul is immortal while the body remains in the earth but represents itself in the form of grass: “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / if you want me again look for me under your boot-soles” (Whitman, 2007, p. 104-5).

Both poets considered the human body as part of nature. After death, the body will back to nature which reminds us the concept of death. Among the manifestations of nature, grass recalls life. In their views, the body is rotted, but grass after death grows on the human grave.

Death is part of Unity:

Whitman in some parts of his poems passes from death and believes there are more important and elegant things behind death. Whitman, like Rumi is close to the Unity. In Unity, there is everything: death, joy, love, and eternity. He considered death a way to establish the certain relation with God. In section 50 of “Song of Myself”, the poet said, “It is not chaos or death – it is form, union, plan – it is eternal life – it is Happiness” (Whitman, 2007, p. 104).

Moreover, in Section 49 of “Song of Myself,” the poet requested death not to warn him, for there is no real death and expressed the ‘oneness of all’ is the soul’s merge with the divine after releasing through death. Man dies and reborn in different forms. “And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me” (Whitman, 2007, p. 102).

Rumi said, “Those persons, then, who have passed from the world are not naught (nonexistent), but they are steeped in the (Divine) Attributes./ All their attributes are (absorbed) in the Attributes of God, even as the star is (left) without trace in the presence of the sun” (Nicholson, 2011, *Mathnavi* IV: 441-2).

Conclusion

With the attitudes of the two outstanding poets, clearly they are more common than the differences. According to the both poets, a mystic death not only is not the end of his existence but also is the beginning and his rebirth; such a death causes the liberation of the soul from the

cage of the body to achieve the eternal life. Immortality is not limited only in spirit, but the human body returns to his main mother (soil), and in the cycle of life causes the lives of other creatures. Hence, death is part of the material and spiritual life of human beings. In Whitman’s view, death is manifested as the part and the cycle of life. Like Rumi, he believed everybody should be the seeker of death rather to be feared because death represents a transition from one state to another. He emphasized the immortality of the soul and body after death.

Информация о конфликте интересов: авторы не имеют конфликтов интересов для декларации.

Information of conflict of interests: authors have no conflicts of interests to declare.

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