

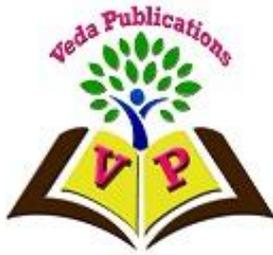


## DEATH ACCEPTANCE THEORY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: PSYCHOLOGICAL READINGS OF DEATH POEMS BY ROBERT FROST, WILLIAM BRYANT, AND EMILY DICKINSON

Dr.Norah Hadi Alsaeed

(Assistant professor-College of Humanities and Administratives, Aljouf University, Saudi Arabia.)

### ABSTRACT



Death continues to remain as one of the biggest threats and a great challenge to humanity. It is a single global event which affects all the human beings in unrecognized modes. Due to the distinguished capability of human beings in terms of social construction and meaning-making, it has developed as a very dynamic and complex system, which involves societal, psychological, biological, , spiritual and cultural factors. Whatever may be the definition we link to death, death is always around us and continues to be a part of our culture, and we all have openly embraced it. This report throws light widely on the theory of death in American poetry with particular reference to the contribution of three poets namely William Bryant, Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson. The study considers the psychological concepts particularly, the existential psychology in defining the theory of death.

**Keywords:** *Death Acceptance Theory, American Poetry, Death Consciousness.*

### Citation:

**APA** Alsaeed,N.H. (2016). Death Acceptance Theory in American Literature: Psychological Readings of Death Poems by Robert Frost, William Bryant, and Emily Dickinson.*Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 3(2), 36-42.

**MLA** Alsaeed,Norah Hadi. "Acceptance Theory in American Literature: Psychological Readings of Death Poems by Robert Frost, William Bryant, and Emily Dickinson."*Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL* 3.2(2016):36-42.

© Copyright VEDA Publication



## INTRODUCTION

The concept of evolving, meaning in life by death is one of the base notions of existential psychology. Various empirical psychologists such as Rollo May have reflected that individuals need to accept the certainty of their death and the deaths of their beloved ones. Else, they cannot completely indulge or determine the actual value of life. This theory traces thorough research which concludes that, more the meaning and purpose that people experience in their lives, the less they fear death. On the contrary, the refusal of accepting death to existential anxiety could result in an emotional trouble in day-to-day life.

Research studies about death anxiety (Kastenbaum, 2000; Neimeyer, 2006) and terror management theory (Solomon et al., 2004) conducted by earlier researchers stressed in the past fifty years about the psychology of death. There only existed scant literature on death acceptance. The study conducted by Ray and Najman(1974) was the initial one instrumental in developing a new measure with regards to the death acceptance. They determined that it had a less, but major positive adjustment in the two scales of death anxiety (311). The evolvement of the co-presence of death acceptance and death anxiety is vital as it shows a conflicted attitude and elemental ambivalent towards death. It is evident that it is not easy to handle the problem of death anxiety about our individual death. Irrespective of how vague and remote, the significance of the death of a beloved one or self will always remain unsettled as it upsets the flow of a person's life. Still, a strongly developed system in death acceptance will control death anxiety at a low level thus preventing it from interrupting our everyday functionality.

## DEATH ANXIETY: AT A GLANCE

In research and medicine, the key person behind making death as a topic for discussion was Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. She created the Stage Model which depicts the coping with death (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) that has impacted on the determination of the death's psychological effects. A few defense mechanisms were found by here which includes bargaining and denial followed by reactions to negative emotions

such as depression and anger that are involved in handling the reality of death(55). Elisabeth's sequential stage concept is the one that was criticized widely. For instance, Bonanno has found in recent times that while coping with sadness; most of the people reach a death acceptance without even passing through earlier stages. It would not mean there are no inner struggles along with emotions of complexity included in sorrow (120). Only the application of direct analysis on death acceptance can acknowledge the modes and methods of coming to terms with death in a positive way. Psychologists, apart from death avoidance and death fear, determined three unique categories of death acceptance. First is "Escape acceptance" that selects death as a better choice to a painful presence. Second is "Approach acceptance", denoting the acknowledgment of death as an entry for a better afterlife. Third is "Neutral death acceptance" that indicates facing death with sensibility as an unavoidable consequence of every life.

## DEATH IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: AT A GLANCE

Death in American Literature illustrated in the composition of various well-known authors. The best examples are the short poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson's "I Couldn't Stop for Death" and William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis". In such poems, death is found to be the major topic in American literature. The prime themes of all these famous writings are inconclusive and are open to assumptions. They all end up with the same outcome of death. Depending on the psychological theories that have arisen in the last fifty years, particularly in extensional psychology, this paper will adopt the interdisciplinary approach in analyzing the psychology of death.

## ROBERT FROST'S TREATMENT ON DEATH

"Attitudes of Escape" approach through committing suicide expressed in the short poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost. "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is usually considered as Frost's masterpiece (Gallons, 39). In the poem, the poet discusses the misery and confusion a man goes through when affected by distress and death is the only possibility he requires. For whatever cause, he is distressed, and his



desperation is about to drive him to the edge and end his life. Clint Stevens thinks that the poem is "by no means the most psychologically enriched poem Frost ever wrote, yet in its austerity and clarity we as readers only benefit (Online)." Perhaps the first thing we notice is that the poem is an interior monolog. He is emotionally and mentally bewildered, but it is his conscience that reminds him of the people who care for him and who would suffer if he died.

Frost uses an array of literary devices throughout his poem that beautifully describes and present the scene viewed by an unknown speaker, the speaker contemplates suicide. The poem implies the attitude of escape acceptance which results from miserable living conditions that the speaker feels unbearable. This death temptation may it be suicide as well, is denoted by the woods that fills up the snow during the year's darkest evening. The speaker is powerfully drawn to these woods and desires to lie down and allow the snow to cover and ultimately bury him underground. The third stanza has a dream-like line that goes as "Of easy wind and downy flake(12)". It prevents the inherent desire of his subconscious wish to die in the dark and snowy woods. The author says, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep (13)," but he resists their morbid attraction.

The critics acknowledge that the central theme relates to the speaker's dilemma in selecting among the responsibilities of daily life and appeal of nature in human society. However, the poem's ambiguity has led to widespread critical debates. Many have indicated that this vagueness is in part is the determination factor of the great poet. Yet another typical interpretation is that, the orator is contemplating suicide referring the woods, "lovely, dark, and deep, (11)". It indicates the temptation of death as a means of escape from the routine duties of daily life. The first line authorizes the voice of a person reflecting quietly within himself on the scenario in front of him: "Whose woods these are I think I know(1)." He pauses here on "the darkest evening of the year(8)". It is the unit of time suspended amid the day and the night; amidst unconsciousness and consciousness; among sleeping and waking; between oblivion and life. There is a bit of uncertainty in the author saying to himself, "I think I know" (1). It again signifies the meeting point, of

what he is aware and what he is doing or not. This resistance, his lack of confidence, and the muffled sense of passion presents the tension by which the poem functions. Few infer that the speaker selects, by the end of the poem, to oppose the allurements of nature and retreats cover to the world of men. But some people place their argument about the repetition of the speaker specifically the last line, "And miles to go before I sleep", (16) suggests an indecisiveness as to whether or not he will, "keep" the "promises (14)", by which he is obliged to return to society.

Here one could recommend that "Escape acceptance" is mainly on the basis of conception that life is so tedious and hard that death acts as a relief. The poem physically agrees that escape acceptance is expressed through suicide and assisted suicide. Cicirelli found that when a person encounters functional loss or intractable pain, they desire to end their lives. In such situations, the death fear is too less than the fear to be alive (663).

#### **WILLIAM BRYANT'S DEATH CONSCIOUS: A NOTE**

"*Thanatopsis*", a famous poem of William Cullen Bryant's literally denotes the "view of death". This poem is considered as a classic regarding death as it provides a placid viewpoint of death. Moreover, no matter what an individual's religious faith, the poem is still relevant. The poem seems to adopt "Approach acceptance" attitude that implies the belief a happy afterlife and reflects a positive outlook on death. Even death found to be an unpleasant end to everything and need not be feared; though it is natural to feel it. Nature provides us this fear for a cause. And yes, it is reasonable for a person to deny the fears and feel empty of them. Many still feel connected to them at a later point, whether it is comfortable or not. One would be able to live with this fear and still have a happy life, as many do. For the cause of just consoling the reader, regarding their dismay of death and dying, Bryant achieves this well. In his words, Bryant draws a picture of life after death and companionship. Moreover, yet that comfort is very primitive:

"To that mysterious realm, where each  
shall take

His chamber in the silent halls of death,



Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,  
 Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained  
 and soothed  
 By an unfaltering trust, approach thy  
 grave,  
 Like one who wraps the drapery of his  
 couch  
 About him, and lies down to pleasant  
 dreams."

In *Thanatopsis*, this fear is recognized and seemingly implied as being unnecessary. Bryant utilizes his determination of death first to accept the fears regarding it and then try to convince the reader. This acknowledgment is evident within the first three sections, from lines 1-30, and then Bryant gradually introduces the reader to the concept that death is not a factor to be feared. It is at this conjunction where *Thanatopsis* evolves to be a hopeful guess that death is not what people expect and fear. He becomes glamorous in his ideals that "thou shalt lie down with patriarchs of the infant world; all in one mighty sepulcher (34-35)". He provides ideas on an afterlife with religious notes though there are apparent efforts to sway away from religion. Bryant's usage of thoughts or words provides the impact that death is glorious and the end of his physical self.

In *Thanatopsis* Bryant considers death a final sleep where "the dead reign" (55). Though it is soothing to consider this and have faith, it has also been atheism and nothing more. At the same time, the poem advances almost into a fairy tale. Bryant's cause of encouraging the reader is expected, but yet it deflects the reader from reality. Bryant never thinks that death could indeed be the edge to life or more, unlike the glamorous departure that he explains. While this fact may be found to be unpleasant by some, it does not lead the reader to happiness on false terms.

*Thanatopsis* sees death as part of the return to nature, similar to death which is another part of life itself. "Earth, that cultivated thee, shall claim Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again, (22-23)." This quote defines that as a human has lived on Earth, the Earth will in turn now live over that person. The individual will live on but in a different format: "Submitting up Thee individual being, shall thou go to mingle forever with the components, (26-27)". What

this quote means is that the person continues to live in Nature through every part of the individual has vanished. *Thanatopsis* also informs the reader that he/she will not be the only person to encounter death. Everyone who has passed away is already there. People who have not gone yet will eventually be there. Age or social class does not matter. All of us share one thing that is death. In that way, we are all equal, and death becomes the great equalizer. The poem also offers living comfort. "and what if thou depart in calmness from the living, and no friend notice thy departure? All that breathe Will share thy fate (59-60)". This quote gives contentment for the living as well. For those who have no one in life, they will not be alone in death. Nobody would ever like a family member or a friend to experience pain or to be left alone. Moreover, Bryant informs us that no person will be alone ever. It is very easy to allow someone to go in this regard.

The real class of the poem is that it offers pleasure to a person irrespective of his/her religious beliefs. If the individual is an atheist or agnostic, the poem views death as just a part of Nature's cycle in which we return to nature. If the person is a Christian or Muslim, the poem offers a distinction between the soul and the body. The body comes back to Nature, and there has been no indication of the spirit or soul. The spirit or soul can be found moving anywhere as there is no indication of it. Hence, this poem is completely able to interpret to Christianity or Islam or atheism. Hence, the poem is identical with various different religions.

Under this, "Approach acceptance" is implanted in spiritual and religious beliefs in a favorable afterlife. For people who include such faiths, the afterlife is better than a symbolic eternity, as it typically connects with divine religious belief or faith in a surpassing realism. Approach acceptance is on the basis of the social construction of life over the grave. Hence, providing comfort and hope to the dying as well as the deprived. Notably Flannely, Weaver, Costa, and Harding indicated rules that evaluate belief in the Afterlife and belief in God's presence. They were both negatively associated with the anxiety of death but positively related to death acceptance (253-261).

**EMILY DICKINSON'S TREATMENT OF DEATH**

The theory of mortality, about her demise, occurs everywhere in Emily Dickinson's letters and poems. In regards to Emily Dickinson's poem, *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, Death Acceptance attitude is reflected and conveys "Neutral Acceptance attitude". The items included in Neutral Acceptance subscale is divided into two factors, Death Acceptance, and Death Avoidance. It indicates that Neutral Acceptance subscale could measure various pathways of death acceptance limiting the belief of an afterlife. She echoes the call of her soul:

"Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The Carriage held but just ourselves –  
And Immortality."

Critic Eunice Glenn mentions: "In the initial two lines Death, illustrated as a carriage driver, ceases for one who could not cease for him. The term 'kindly' is specifically meaningful, for it immediately represents Death. It is a surprise, as death is more often considered grim and terrible (Online)". Critic Charles R. Anderson indicates that death is usually rude, occurs suddenly and has changed into a compassionate and restful gentleman (Online)". Both critics are found to agree on the importance of the term "kindly" in the initial two lines of the poem. "As I could not pause for Death, He gently halted for me" (1-2). They consider the word "kindly" for its most common definitions such as pleasant, and agreeable benevolent. With further investigation, more interesting descriptions are available. The term 'kindly' is defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as "by nature; naturally; by natural disposition; characteristically and in the way suitable or appropriate to the nature of the thing; appropriately and fittingly". The poem may have different insights based on these definitions. Apparently, Death performed a charitable act for the sake to speaker when applying these least used definitions. In spite of this, it is mandatory for the death stopping for the speaker which should be proper as well. The natural course of things were followed and she is clear that Death was just obligated to stop for her rather than suggesting Death as a charming "courteous carriage driver,"

which she could not stop. It seems to be quite interesting to note the speech by her stating she "wouldn't" stop. But Charles Anderson and some critics like him suggest that she should first be engaged in her complete life to stop like all busy mortals (Anderson, online). On the other hand, another Critic named Patricia Engle further enquires, "What does the speaker—or anyone—stop doing for Death?" As an answer to her question, Engle says: "We stop living." In order to postulate here point, she further added about the poem speaker that "She understands that she cannot realize Death's power over her. Once she identifies with that eternal or divine bent within her, Death stops; that is, Death ceases to be what Death is—an end" (74). An accurate analysis of the poem is portrayed here based on the deeper analysis in a holistic perspective. Our speaker doesn't have any final stopping like Death. The carriage only "paused" at the grave (17). "The Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity—" (23-24). The poem further suggested that in no way that death can be taken as an end to the existence of human being rather than which it opens up the other world. It denotes the often overlooked, passenger in the carriage of Immortality (4). In the case of Mortals, they do not stop for death instead of which death stops for them. The immortality can be achieved through Death which can result in the end. In spite when she thought to do so, the speaker wouldn't be able to have stopped for Death. The grave is merely a brief pause in the journey toward Eternity.

When Dickinson chose to personify the death as a carriage driver, she cleverly had a definite purpose. Based on the terminology present in the *Handbook of Literary Terms* it is mentioned as, "Personification allows an author to dramatize the nonhuman world in human terms" (Kennedy, 112). By enabling death with human aspects, it evolves to be less frightening to the speaker. She understands the Death as the concept now. Seeing as "the problem of mortality is one of mindset" (Engle 74), making death human helps the speaker to get past that problem. It is much easier for the speaker to believe she can overcome the grave when she sees death as an amiable carriage driver, conducting her into eternity, rather than an



unwanted fate that would eliminate her existence. As the speaker wished to become the immortal Human being, Death, through natural and proper way of reaching, gives up his claim upon her. Death stops being an end, and becomes, rather, the means of conducting mortals into eternity.

### CONCLUSION

Death is for the modern mind no more than a speculation and a theory; it has never been proved by the methods of modern science or to the satisfaction of the new critical mind formed by a scientific culture. Frost, Bryant, and Dickinson show the very cognitive capability that threatens us about the anticipation of death can also save us from this terror. Our capability for seeking, meaning and the meaning-making pave way to discover which is so beautiful and with enough power which can remove the fear.

### REFERENCES

- [1]. Anderson, Charles R. *Modern American Poetry*. 1 Jan 2002. The University of Illinois. 13 Sept. 2005. [http://www.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/dickinson/712.htm](http://www.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dickinson/712.htm).
- [2]. Bonanno, G. A. *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009.
- [3]. Bryant. *William Cullen*. Retrieved November 24, 2007, at Web Site: <http://www.msu.edu/~cloudsar/thanatop.htm>
- [4]. Cicirelli, V. G. Personal meanings of death in older adults and young adults in relation to their fears of death. *Death Studies*, 25(8) (2001), 663-683.
- [5]. Clements, R., & Rooda, L. A. Factor structure, reliability, and validity of the death attitude profile-revised. *The Journal of Death and Dying*, 40(3), (1999-2000), 453-463.
- [6]. Dickinson, Emily. "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1960.
- [7]. Engle, Patricia. "Dickinson's 'Because I Could Not Stop For Death'". *The Explicator* 60(2002): 72-75.
- [8]. Frost, Robert. *Stopping by woods on a snowy evening*. U.S.A: Dutton Juvenile, 2001. Clint Stevens. [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/frost/woods.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/woods.htm)
- [9]. Gesser, G., Wong, P. T. P., & Reker, G. T. Death attitudes across the life-span: The development and validation of the Death Attitude Profile (DAP). *Omega*, 18, (1988),113-128.
- [10]. Gibran, K. *The Prophet*. UK: London: Senate Press, 1994.
- [11]. Glenn, Eunice. *Modern American Poetry*. 1 Jan 2002. University of Illinois. 13 Sept. 2005. [/poets/a\\_f/dickinson/712.htm](http://poets/a_f/dickinson/712.htm).
- [12]. Greenberg, J., Koole, S. L., & Pyszczynski, T. Eds. *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2004.
- [13]. Harding, S. R., Flannelly, K. J., Weaver, A. J., Costa, K. G. The influence of religion on death anxiety and death acceptance. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*,8, 2005.
- [14]. Hirschhorn, Norbert, and Polly Longworth. "'Medicine Posthumous': A New Look at Emily Dickinson's Medical Conditions." *The New England Quarterly* (June 1996). 299-316.
- [15]. Kastenbaum, R. (2000). *The psychology of death*. New York: NY: Springer.
- [16]. Kears, M. C. *Endings: A sociology of death and dying*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- [17]. Kennedy, X.J., Dana Gioia, and Mark Bauerlein. *Handbook of Literary Terms*. Chelmsford: Courier Corp.,2005."Kindly."Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989
- [18]. Kubler-Ross, E. *On death and dying*, 40th-anniversary edition. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009.
- [19]. Long, William J. *Outlines of English and American Literature*. Retrieved November 24, 2007, at Web Site: <http://www.humanitiesweb.org/human.php?s=l&p=c&a=b&ID=48>.
- [20]. Neimeyer, R. A., Moser, R. & Wittkowski, J. Assessing attitudes toward death: Psychometric considerations. *Omega*, 47, (2003), 45-76.
- [21]. Neimeyer, R.A. (2006). From Death Anxiety to Meaning Making at the End of Life: Recommendations for Psychological Assessment. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*. [Online]. 12 (3). p.pp. 354-357. Available from: <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1093/clipsy.bpi036>.
- [22]. Palmer, G. *Death: The trip of a lifetime*. San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1993.



- [23]. Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., & Solomon, S. A dual process model of defense against conscious and unconscious death-related thoughts: An extension of terror management theory. *Psychological Review*, 106, (1999), 835-845.
- [24]. Ray, J.J. & Najman, J. (1974). Death anxiety and death acceptance: A preliminary approach. *Omega*. 5 (4). p.pp. 311–315.
- [25]. Solomon, S., Greenberg, J. & Pyszczynski, T. (2004). The Cultural Animal: Twenty Years of Terror Management Theory and Research. In: J. Greenberg, S. L. Koole, & T. Pyszczynski (eds.). *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*. New York, NY, US: Guilford Press, p. 528.
- [26]. Thanatopsis. Retrieved November 24, 2007, at Web Site:  
<http://www.cs.rice.edu/~ssiyer/minstrels/poems/302.html>
- [27]. Tomer, A. ed. *Death attitudes and the older adult: Theories, concepts, and applications*. Philadelphia, PA: Brunner- Routledge, 2000.
- [28]. Tomer, A., Eliason, G. T., & Wong, P. T. P. *Existential and spiritual issues in death attitudes*. New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008.
- [29]. Wong, P. T. P. Meaning Therapy: An Integrative and positive existential psychotherapy. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 40(2), (2010), 85-93.
- [30]. Yalom, I. D. *Staring at the sun: Overcoming the terror of death*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008.
-