

## ABSTRACT

### Death Observed Through Literature: An Assessment of Death in the Writings of Lucretius Carus, Theodore Roethke and Walt Whitman

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A close examination on what it means to die by looking at the different works of literature by Lucretius Carus, Theodore Roethke, and Walt Whitman. Each poet described differing perspectives on death that range from the expiration of body, mind and soul, to death regarded as the beginning of a different state of existence. Even the latter was contrasted by these authors as one considered the renewed state as continued by the legacy left behind, while another perceived death as glory in God and victorious in death. Yet, despite their differences each author attempted to quell the fear of death.

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DEATH OBSERVED THROUGH LITERATURE:  
AN ASSESSMENT OF DEATH IN THE WRITINGS OF LUCRETIVS CARUS,  
THEODORE ROETHKE AND WALT WHITMAN

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## PREFACE

Since the dawn of mankind, man has attempted to answer the question of what comes of him after death. The question of what happens to man's spirit has become the topic of debate for classical and modern philosophers, as well as authors, poets and theologians. In a way, death has captured the fascination of nearly every form of literature from the classical works to modern, young adult novels. Because death is imminent, the question debated is whether death marks the end, or as Christians believe, is it simply the beginning? Among the numerous scholars, authors, and poets, three literary figures—Lucretius Carus, Theodore Roethke, and Walt Whitman—attempted to answer this question through their writings. Each of these authors illustrated death based on the societal beliefs of his times, which allowed for contrast and comparison. Lucretius presented the notion that there was nothing after death (within his major work the *De Rerum Natura*), while both Roethke and Whitman presented an argument for an afterlife in each of his respective literary works. Yet, even though Roethke and Whitman shared the belief of an afterlife, both demonstrated clear differences as to their meaning of what happened after death. Philip Terman in his work on Stanley Plumly classified Theodore Roethke as an “abrupt edge author” in which:

Everywhere in his poems we confront these edges – between sleeping and waking, past and present, where field meets woods, body meets spirit, or more significantly, where these worlds blur, get fused, confused,

intermixed, where literal becomes metaphor, personal becomes archetype.<sup>1</sup>

Whitman, a transcendentalist, did not view the afterlife as state of being, such as place of heaven or hell, but as a state of progressive development and as a means to an end. Roethke on the other hand presented death as a state of transition for one's soul into the afterlife, an afterlife that encompassed the Christian view of heaven and hell.

This thesis will illustrate how these writers viewed death, which they presented with a lack of fear towards it, and how they attempted to indoctrinate their audience through their literature. Each author investigated death and applied his findings to paper in an attempt to quell the fear of death. The purpose of this study is not to define the correct point of view, but to present the argument for the Atheist, the Theist and the Agnostic. Thomas Aquinas described society's fear of death stating, "Man (woman) shuns death not only when he (she) feels its presence, but also when he (she) thinks of it".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Terman, Philip. "The Abrupt Edge: The Poetry of Stanley Plumly." *The Gettysburg review* 14, no. 1 (2001): 143.

<sup>2</sup> Choron, Jacques. (1964). *Modern Man and Mortality*. New York: Macmillan: 100.

## CHAPTER 1

### Lucretius Carus

Titus Lucretius Carus, a Roman philosopher and poet, illustrated his reasoning of the afterlife in his only major work, *De Rerum Natura*, as a means to observe how a portion of the ancients conceptualized death. Beginning with the opening of Book II, Lucretius gave an analogy of a man drowning:

Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,  
e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;  
non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptus,  
sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est. (2.1-4)<sup>3</sup>

Translated from Latin to English Lucretius wrote:

“It is sweet, when the winds troubling the waters on the great sea, to watch from the land of another man’s great labor; not because it is any man’s pleasing desire to be troubled, but because to separate what wickedness you are free from yourself is sweet.”

Within the first few lines of the Book II, Lucretius sets a dark, depressing tone. For one man to watch another man drown seemed appalling; yet, it provides a view of Lucretius’ mindset. He espouses the belief that it is far better for a man to reflect upon his own transgressions rather than upon that of another. For Lucretius, there finds no reason to help the drowning man, as he finds pleasure from the image thinking, “I am glad it is not I who is drowning”. Expanding on this train of thought, Lucretius poses the question: why risk one’s life to help another man when a life was simply a series of chemical reactions and other processes, in which death was

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<sup>3</sup> Lucretius Carus, Titus. *De rerum natura / Lucretius ; with an English translation by W. H. D. Rouse ; rev. with new text, introd., notes, and index by Martin Ferguson Smith*. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press ; London : Heinemann, 1975.



the cessation of those processes? To view life in this manner meant that there is no need to sacrifice the only life a person had for another man. Sacrifice, then, becomes a wasteful use of one's limited time on earth. In the third book of the *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius presented a thought similar to the opening of the second book. In this passage, Lucretius demonstrates that a man in danger reveals his true nature.

Quo magis in dubiis hominem spectare periclis  
convenit adversisque in rebus noscere qui sit;  
nam verae voces tum demum pectore ab imo  
eliciuntur et eripitur persona, manet res. (3.55-58)

"Thus it is more useful to scrutinize a man in danger or peril,  
and to discern in adversity what manner of man he is;  
for only then are the words of truth drawn up from the innermost heart,  
the mask is torn off, the reality remains."

From this passage, Lucretius illustrates to the readers the necessity of danger in order for men to understand what truly lies in their hearts. This understanding occurs because death becomes more tangible at moments of peril, when the subject knows and experiences fear. Once this realization settles on the mind, Lucretius ponders whether it is better to cease to be or to hope for something else after death. Those choosing the latter, experience only disappointment according to Lucretius; thus, it becomes necessary to reject fear.

Moreover, if one defines Lucretius's philosophical stance based on the previous two passages, one would classify him as an epicurean because his writings depicted him as a person free from the fear of death and inclined to seek the ultimate pleasure of mental awareness. The ancient Epicurean concept of death, and the afterlife share similarities with the modern concept of atheism; however, it would not be prudent to claim that Lucretius was an atheist. By describing a

scenario that involved battle and death, the Lucretian influence on atheism can be seen in the ensuing passage:

his tibi tum rebus timefactae religiones  
effugiunt animo pavidae, mortisque timores  
tum vacuum pectus linquunt curaque solutum. (2.44-46)

“For these things frighten your religions and they flee it in a panic-stricken escape from your mind, and death’s terrors leave your heart devoid and freed of care.”

With this statement, Lucretius demonstrates his belief that all men will eventually turn away from religion in the face of death. Furthermore, as Peter Aronoff sites in his dissertation, Lucretius, as an Epicurean, thought, “gods are entirely without anger or gratitude.”<sup>4</sup> With this concept of religion, no mortal human could do anything in life to please such beings, for they lack such emotions. Therefore, worrying about an eternal life would be fruitless and wasteful. Considering this concept, the questions of whether or not one enjoyed the life he or she lived becomes relevant. If an individual did enjoy his (her) life, then he (she) would part with it gratefully; and, if a person did not enjoy his (her) life, then what prevents he (she) from ending it? In this frame of mind, death becomes imminent; therefore, no amount of worship of a deity or good deeds would matter in the end. For Lucretius and other Epicureans, the only thing that mattered was whether one enjoyed his life.

In the *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius even claims the following:

multo igitur mortem minus ad nos esse putandumst,  
si minus esse potest quam quod nil esse videmus;  
maior enim turbae disiectus materiae  
consequitur leto, nec quisquam expergitus exstat,

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<sup>4</sup> Aronoff, Peter. *Lucretius and the Fears of Death*, January 1, 1997. 27.

frigida quem semel est vitae pausa secuta. (3.926-930)

“Death therefore must be thought of much less moment to us, if there can be anything less than what we see to be nothing; for a greater dispersion of the disturbed matter takes place at death, and no one awakens and rises whom the cold stoppage of life has once overtaken.”

In Lucretius’ own interpretation, death results on an empty plane, with nothing more than a final sleep as noted by *experigitus*, which, translated, meant “having been awakened.” By equating the two concepts of sleep and death together, Lucretius brings the readers back to the question: Does one enjoy life, or not? In both states of being, sleeping and death, each involves inactivity and a lack of sensation, with the only difference being that one: death, is more permanent than the other, sleep. Tobias Reinhardt proceeded to make the point that, “when we are in deep and dreamless sleep, we likewise do not have sensual perception and hence do not miss pleasures we could have enjoyed while awake.”<sup>5</sup> From this point of view, and taking into account the beliefs of Lucretius, it is better for those who found no pleasure in life just to die, because it related to a more permanent state of sleep. Despite not believing in gods as noted before, Lucretius views the gods as more of an ideal rather than beings to be worshiped. Shirley Jackson stated the following:

“The gods were the concrete embodiment of the Epicureans' ideal man. They were free from all care, perfectly happy, and enjoyed perpetually a life of delightful fellowship with one another”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Reinhardt, Tobias. “Readers in the Underworld: Lucretius, de Rerum Natura 3.912-1075.” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 94, no. (January 1, 2004): 29. doi:10.2307/4135009.

<sup>6</sup> Shirley Jackson Case. “The Religion of Lucretius.” *The American Journal of Theology* 19, no. 1 (January 1, 1915): 104. doi:10.2307/3155898.

The gods, in Jackson's commentary, become model representations of men rather than supreme beings, and as such do not exclude any form of religion. Instead, Lucretius believes that the gods represent the desires of men on how to live life.

Another major topic in the *De Rerum Natura* was Lucretius' claim that death was not to be feared.

Nam veluti pueri trepidant atque omnia caecis  
in tenebris metuunt, sic nos in luce timemus  
interdum, nilo quae sunt metuenda magis quam  
quae pueri in tenebris pavitant finguntque futura.  
hunc igitur terrorem animi tenebrasque necessest  
non radii solis neque lucida tela diei  
discutiant sed naturae species ratioque" (2. 56-62)

"For as children tremble and fear everything in the blind darkness,  
so we in the light sometimes fear what is no more to be feared than the  
things children in the dark hold in terror and imagine will come true.  
This terror therefore and darkness of mind must be dispelled not by the  
rays of the sun and glittering shafts of day, but by the aspect and law of  
nature"

In this passage, Lucretius notes that one of the basic fears is that of the unknown. For most philosophers and thinkers, the mind tends to wander and understand that which is new and undiscovered. The old adage "curiosity killed the cat" can be derived from this concept. For Lucretius, curiosity acts as an actual killer, a killer of the epicurean lifestyle. By worrying about death, a person focuses on future prospects and conditions, rather than on living for the moment. These "what-if" moments enable a person to start thinking about future pain and stress associated with death. Lucretius, on the other hand, wants to allay any fears by teaching that pain lasts for a brief moment for as long as consciousness remains.

This thought tends to follow the Epicurean thinks, about which James Warren wrote, “at that time [of death] we will feel no pain or distress.”<sup>7</sup> Because Lucretius believes that there is no form of the being after death, then sensations, such as pain or distress, become insignificant. According to Warren, when pain or distress becomes insignificant in the mind, “it makes no sense to talk about my well-or-ill being”<sup>8</sup> after death. Therefore, it becomes illogical to fear death because nothing will change when life expires, a thought that Lucretius sums up as follows:

Nil igitur mors est ad nos neque pertinet hilum,  
quandoquidem natura animi mortalis habetur. (3.830-831)

“Death therefore is nothing to us nor does it concern us not one bit,  
seeing that the nature of the spirit we possess is held mortal.”

Following this train of thought, the Epicurean concept of death becomes clear and holds semblance to modern atheistic thoughts on death. The idea that death is the final act in life could trouble some individuals; however, Lucretius wants to console his audience with the aforementioned passage. If pain and stress are nonexistent once death occurred, then what is there to fear because death only ends life. By eliminating any arguments about pain of distress, then the only reason someone would fear death comes as the result of an unresolved psychological matter about life. In his article, Fischer claimed that a, “principle strong enough to entail that death can be bad for the individual who dies over a slightly weaker principle.”<sup>9</sup> In

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<sup>7</sup> Warren, James. “Lucretius, Symmetry Arguments, and Fearing Death.” *Phronesis* 46, no. 4 (November 1, 2001): 468. doi:10.2307/4182682.

<sup>8</sup> Warren, James. “Lucretius, Symmetry Arguments, and Fearing Death.” *Phronesis* 46, no. 4 (November 1, 2001): 469. doi:10.2307/4182682.

<sup>9</sup> Fischer, John Martin. “Epicureanism about Death and Immortality.” *The Journal of Ethics* 10, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 371. doi:10.2307/25115869.

other words, death can be seen as a frightening concept to those who have weak principles, such as regret. When a regret becomes strong enough to affect a person's mentality, then dying becomes a frightening thought to people on the verge of death. This is the main reason why Lucretius emphasizes enjoying life fully and leaving no regrets behind; and yet, he did not approve of the extension of life, which can be seen as a main theme in book III.

Vitaque mancipio, nulli datur, omnibus usu (3. 971)

"To none is life given in freehold, to all on lease"

From this brief passage, Lucretius concedes that life was only a temporary gift given to man; and, like all gifts; Lucretius wants his audience to understand that a gift should be enjoyed and used, not squandered.

In Lucretius' view, death reveals the true nature of life and death, because death freed the body from worrying about what happened after a person died. This notion implies that death presented finality, and there should be no reason to consider what happens afterwards. Moreover he stated:

omnis cum in tenebris praesertim vita laboret (2.54)

"especially since all life labors in darkness"

This assertion means that the main struggle of man was an uphill battle in trying to make light of the surrounding darkness where he or she resided. Even though this passage was interpreted as an avocation for philosophy, the passage could also be interpreted as a basis for the Epicurean lifestyle. With the prevalence of religion, fear, and any other thought that distracts one from living for today, one realizes that living a life based on pleasure becomes an uphill struggle. Lucretius yearns for his

readers to reject any thoughts not involving the here and now. Thus, life should be enjoyed to the fullest if death is unavoidable.

On the other hand, Lucretius feels that enjoying too much of life could also be bad. For example, if an individual enjoys life too much, then he would wish to extend his life for continued enjoyment, or he would begin to seek ways to continue life beyond death.

Nec prorsum vitam ducendo demimus hilum  
tempore de mortis nec delibare valemus. (3.1087-1088)

“By protracting life, we do not deduct one bit from the duration of death”

In other words, Lucretius addresses the concept of trying to extend life by noting the pointlessness of immortality. Nothing can be gained from delaying death, other than foolishness, because death is more permanent than life. Here, Lucretius reveals the inevitability of death. This thought becomes an argument in favor of living for the moment and the now. In response to extending life after death, Lucretius responds much more cynically in regards to religion.

Nam petere imperium quod inanus nec datur umquam,  
atque in eo semper durum sufferre laborem,  
hoc est adverso nixantem trudere monte  
saxum quod tamen e summo iam vertice rursum  
volvitur et plani raptim petit aequora campi. (3.998-1002)

“Yes, to seek power that's vain and never granted  
and for it to suffer hardship and endless pain:  
this is to heave and strain to push uphill a boulder,  
that still from the very top rolls back and bounds  
and bounces down to the bare, broad field.”

This passage reveals a reference to Sisyphus and his punishment in Tartarus. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was punished for being a deceitful, conniving man and

was doomed eternally to roll a large boulder up a steep incline only for it to fall back down every time. In this passage, Lucretius compares religion to the punishment, in which no matter how hard someone struggles for a god's blessing in the end, the result would be only disappointment and frustration. Following this train of thought, religion is meaningless and frustrating to Lucretius and serves only to deceive individuals considering the actual concept of death. Because Lucretius regards death as the ultimate end, believing in a religion was a waste of time and serving only to trick the fool into believing that immortality was possible. To Epicureans, immortality itself was a trick on the human mind only to perpetrate pain and suffering. Fischer, in his previously cited article, claimed that immortality was similar to everyday life.

“As with the virtues, we must remember that there are dangers other than death. So, even if I realize that I am invulnerable to death and thus that I would continue to live, even if I were to fall from a high mountain cliff or were riddled with bullets, I would still realize that I would no doubt be significantly damaged by such things. Consequent pain, suffering, and disability would be a constraint against trying such antics, and would also temper any inclination to suppose that one had "infinite" or super-powers.”<sup>10</sup>

From this quotation, even though a person would live forever, all feelings, thoughts, and processes associated with life only continue, with an exception being death itself. The question becomes: “ why bother in extending life, when it will only prolong suffering”? Lucretius attempts to answer this question in his renunciation of religion.

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<sup>10</sup> Fischer, John Martin. “Epicureanism about Death and Immortality.” *The Journal of Ethics* 10, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 381. doi:10.2307/25115869.



In examining the *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius advocates arguments against religion just as much as he advocated an epicurean lifestyle. To Lucretius, religion served only to deceive the minds of men by allowing them to believe that the spirit had an opportunity to continue living in spite of death.

Nequiquam, quoniam medio de fonte leporum  
surgit amari aliquid quod in ipsis floribus angat (4. 1133-1134)

“In the midst of the fountain of pleasantness there arises something bitter,  
which stings in the very flowers”

In this passage, *leporum* means pleasantness, charm, and delight. Religion, therefore, tends to please people by promising some sort of eternity, whether it is punishment or bliss, for their soul. Lucretius entreated his readers to turn away from this charm on the grounds that religion led to disappointment. By believing that the soul and the body die, the hope for some sort of eternal life causes only heartbreak and despair. This passage also appears to draw upon the myth of the lotus fruit. In the Homeric epics, the lotus was a fruit so delicious that it affected the minds of men so that one taste caused immense desire to eat the fruit. The desire became so great that the lotus-eaters forgot any thoughts of returning home to friends and family. For Lucretius, religion acts as a lotus fruit that entraps the minds of men and prevents them from living for the moment. James Jope stated that Lucretius, and even Epicurus himself, saw religion as “a clever mimicry and exploitation of the arbitrary allegorical technique.”<sup>11</sup> Jope’s statement leads to a conclusion that Lucretius thought religion acted only as poor copy of nature and its allegories. In fact, the article

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<sup>11</sup> Jope, James. “Lucretius, Cybele, and Religion.” *Phoenix* 39, no. 3 (October 1, 1985): 261. doi:10.2307/1088638.

claimed that religion caused the fears of death to manifest itself in the minds of men, a notion that Lucretius holds.

“Epicureans viewed the fear of death and religious fear as the greatest sources of anxiety, and undertook with missionary zeal to free their contemporaries of these fears. In the fear of death itself- the question of mortality -they addressed an ultimate concern of all ages, which elicited Epicurus' incisive and Lucretius' psychological sensitivity”<sup>12</sup>

Religion, therefore, only poisons the mind, much like the lotus fruit. Because religion split the focus of thought on both life and afterlife, man becomes unable to live life as it was meant to be. For this reason, Lucretius opposes religion, because it hinders a person from finding pleasure in life.

Thus, Lucretius' thoughts on death show that he believes death to be an end to cognizance. Therefore, one should live life to the fullest and not be bogged down by thoughts of religion and immortality. In order to accomplish this, one needs to not be intimidated by death. Being such an early theorist on the philosophy of death, Lucretius influences many other philosophers, authors, and poets. Moreover, both Lucretius' philosophy and his *De Rerum Natura* influenced Theodore Roethke and Walt Whitman; however, they both developed different viewpoints on what happened, if anything, after death.

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<sup>12</sup> Jope, James. “Lucretius, Cybele, and Religion.” *Phoenix* 39, no. 3 (October 1, 1985): 250–62. doi:10.2307/1088638.

## CHAPTER 2

### Theodore Roethke

In contrast to Lucretius' view on death, the poet Theodore Roethke holds a more hopeful view of death. Through further analysis Roethke conveyed a sense of hope with comparisons and allusions to a possible afterlife with God in order to allay any fear of dying. Although Roethke wanted to be hopeful in his works, he still portrays death as a common, everyday facet of life. Roethke presents a Lucretian influence in his work by stating that death was not something to be feared, but instead something to be considered as a part of nature. Nicholas Bradley claimed that Roethke read several books about Lucretius, and that he, at the very least, was familiar with the *De Rerum Natura*,

"He writes that Roethke learned this 'lesson' from Thoreau, Whitman, and Emerson. The influence of these American writers on Roethke's affinity for the natural world is undoubted; perhaps the influence, even if indirect or limited, of Lucretius' poem of nature should also be considered."<sup>13</sup>

From Bradley's perspective, Roethke had many other sources of inspiration for his topics on nature, mainly some knowledge of Lucretius. To see this influence, just compare the ending of the "The Small" with this passage from the *De Rerum Natura*.

"And things throw light on things,  
And all the stones have wings"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bradley, Nicholas. "A Possible Allusion in Theodore Roethke's 'The Small.'" *Notes and Queries* 58, no. 4 (December 1, 2011): 592. doi:10.1093/notesj/gjr144.

<sup>14</sup> Theodore Roethke, *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (New York, 1975), 142.

Haec sic pernosces parva perductus opella;  
namque alud ex alio clarescet nec tibi caeca  
nox iter eripiet quin ultima naturai  
pervideas: ita res accendent lumina rebus (1.1114-17)<sup>15</sup>

“So you will gain a thorough understanding of these matters,  
led on with little effort; for things will become clear out of another, and  
blind night will not snatch away your path and prevent you from seeing  
the uttermost recesses of nature: so clearly will truths kindle light for  
truths”

A cursory view of the passages, portray minor similarities between the two poets, or  
at the least that Roethke knew enough about the philosopher to make a possible  
allusion to his works.

In his poem, “In Dark Time” Roethke proffered a new way that death might  
be considered. The opening stanza alone carries numerous references to death in  
itself.

1 In a dark time, the eye begins to see,  
2 I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;  
3 I hear my echo in the echoing wood---  
4 A lord of nature weeping to a tree.  
5 I live between the heron and the wren,  
6 Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den<sup>16</sup>

The overlying image of the dark forest implies a state of death, whereas the  
“shadow” in line 2 is the ghost of the poet. In John Hobbs’ and Beatrice Roethke’s  
article “The Poet as His Own Interpreter” Hobbs claimed that the shadow was “a  
reminder that [he] is going to die.”<sup>17</sup> Having a reminder of death indicates the frailty

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<sup>15</sup> Lucretius Carus, Titus. *De rerum natura / Lucretius ; with an English translation by W. H. D. Rouse ; rev. with new text, introd., notes, and index by Martin Ferguson Smith*. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press ; London : Heinemann, 1975.

<sup>16</sup>Roethke, Theodore. "In a Dark Time." In *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, 231. New York--London: Anchor Books, an imprint of Doubleday, 1975. See full poem in the APPENDIX A

<sup>17</sup>Hobbs, John and Beatrice Roethke. "The Poet as His Own Interpreter: Roethke on "in a Dark Time".

of life around us. This situation causes a more introspective look at life in comparison with the Epicureans, who lived for the sake of experiencing all pleasures in life. The dimmed images of shade and darkness also continue, “to suggest ‘Hades or hell itself’”. Despite the dark locations implied in the poem, the use of the wooded imagery from before brings out feelings of life. Contrary to the Epicureans and Lucretius from earlier, Roethke demonstrates death to not be permanent state of being, but rather that there was a life after death.

To further the concept of an afterlife, line four of the poem brings forth man “weeping to a tree”.

4 A lord of nature weeping to a tree.

This line breaks from the desolation of the wooded area in the previous lines and in turn focuses on one, solitary tree. The weeping man, according to Hobbs, “empathized the distance between man’s suffering in the time of death.”<sup>18</sup> To most, this thought revealed how no man wants to die, as shown by the societal view that favors preserving lives for as long as physically possible. The tree, before which the man weeps, on the other hand, is unresponsive to indicate the unavoidability that is death. Roethke further emphasizes this fact with naming the man as “Lord of nature”.

Beneath these pessimistic tones of death, as an absolute, lie qualities of something beyond death. Even though the man laments the loss of his life, he is unaware of the life surrounding him, from the trees again in line 2 to the “heron and

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*College English* 33, no. 1 (1971): 58.

<sup>18</sup> Hobbs, John and Beatrice Roethke. "The Poet as His Own Interpreter: Roethke on "in a Dark Time"." *College English* 33, no. 1 (1971): 59.

wren” in line 5 and to the “beasts” and “snakes” in line 6.

1 In a dark time, the eye begins to see,  
2 I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;  
3 I hear my echo in the echoing wood---  
4 A lord of nature weeping to a tree.  
5 I live between the heron and the wren,  
6 Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den

Such images become reminiscent of *Genesis*, when Roethke changes the barrenness from the previous lines to a figurative Eden. But imagining Eden from these last few lines allows the reader to equate the speaker with Adam, an allusion that became another reference to *Genesis* when God made Adam the ruler of His creatures on earth. In continuation of the tree as an unavoidable means of death, the speaker continues the theme of death being unavoidable with line 15;

15. “And in broad day the midnight come again”

The speaker implies that death could occur at any time. Tying this image with the previous idea of the tree as a symbol of death makes the first stanza an image of the fall and, according to Christian tradition, the beginning of death.

By interpreting sin as death, the next stanza becomes an image of the speaker trying to fight his internal desires with his moral preferences from the two opening lines of the next stanza:

7 What's madness but nobility of soul  
8 At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!

A Christian may interpret this thought as man’s continuous struggle with sin over following God’s word. The rest of the stanza continues this image of struggle between doing what is right and what is wrong, with the most prominent image being the speaker on the edge of the gaping hole or winding road. The resulting

image is that it is easier for a man to fall into the dark cave of sin rather than to climb the long, serpentine road back to the top. The speaker emphasizes the point of how a good soul must struggle with ease of sin.

7     What's madness but nobility of soul  
8     At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!  
9     I know the purity of pure despair,  
10    My shadow pinned against a sweating wall

With death as a constant in life, the speaker implied that people will search long and hard to determine who they are in life, whether it is good or bad. This introspection results in the hope that one made a good impression on those left behind. For the speaker, however, some will get caught up in the world or in themselves and they will lose their souls to another form of death: that of a becoming a, "shell of who they were."<sup>19</sup> By becoming caught up in temptation and the search for finding out their state of being, people can lose their souls to become a husking form that was once human, basically a second death.

Despite the inevitability of death and corruption of the soul, the speaker sought a way to overcome death. In the last stanza, the speaker acknowledges that death looms over him, and how his desires led him ever closer to death.

19    Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.  
20    My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,  
21    Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?  
22    A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.  
23    The mind enters itself, and God the mind,  
24    And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

The metaphor of the summer fly hitting a window demonstrates the speaker's insistence to break out of the cage of death. This also applies to how some men do

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<sup>19</sup> Hobbs, John and Beatrice Roethke. "The Poet as His Own Interpreter: Roethke on "in a Dark Time"." *College English* 33, no. 1 (1971): 59.

everything in their own power to avoid their mortality. On the other hand, the speaker turns to God for guidance. By emphasizing words such as “I” and “One” with capitals, the speaker implies God’s providence, which is confirmed when the speaker turns his mind toward God. In the Christian tradition, by turning to God, life is obtained after death. In the *Acts of the Apostles* from the Bible, it is written, “And He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything. Rather, He himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.”<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, God is the only way to ensure life after death, a sentiment reinforced by the speaker as he cast his fear of death aside once he knew God.

In another of Roethke’s poem, “The Far Field” examines more of his general beliefs on death. In “The Far Field,” Roethke opens with a man driving along a dark, snowy road. By studying the first two stanzas, one notices the reversal of human progress and the joy in nature. With the broken machinery, the car, the traffic and pipes help to portray the image of progress and accomplishments of men. But the snowy fields and descriptions of the various forms of wildlife, however, display the presence of nature within said progress, especially with the degradation of some of the machines lying around.

13 At the field's end, in the corner missed by the mower,  
14 Where the turf drops off into a grass-hidden culvert,  
15 Haunt of the cat-bird, nesting-place of the field-mouse,  
16 Not too far away from the ever-changing flower-dump,  
17 Among the tin cans, tires, rusted pipes, broken machinery,---  
18 One learned of the eternal<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Every Man's Bible, New Living Translation (2004). Acts 17:25. Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers

<sup>21</sup> Roethke, Theodore. "The Far Field." In *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, 193. New York--London: Anchor Books, an imprint of Doubleday, 1975. See full poem in the Appendix A



A cycle occurs between progress and nature in which one repeatedly turns into the other, much like the change in seasons from winter to spring. The speaker attempts to prove that man was unable to escape nature completely, a sentiment especially present in the following stanzas until the reader reaches the fifth stanza.

50 I learned not to fear infinity,  
51 The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,  
52 The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,  
53 The wheel turning away from itself,  
54 The sprawl of the wave,  
55 The on-coming water.

In line 50, the speaker declared that infinity should not be feared. The reader can infer that anything unknown is not intimidating, just unfamiliar. The speaker emphasizes this point with images that seem to have indefinite origins and ends, such as a cliff face, or a wheel, time or even waves. Each of the mentioned images comes from nature, as well as illustrates a cyclical pattern that repeats on end as well. From this never-ending pattern, the concept of infinity has a natural foreignness to it. Through the use of this imagery, the speaker ties the unknown to nature.

In the third section of the poem that begins at line 56, the speaker continued the natural theme by converging on a flowing river.

56 The river turns on itself,  
57 The tree retreats into its own shadow.  
58 I feel a weightless change, a moving forward  
59 As of water quickening before a narrowing channel  
60 When banks converge, and the wide river whitens;  
61 Or when two rivers combine, the blue glacial torrent  
62 And the yellowish-green from the mountainy upland,---  
63 At first a swift rippling between rocks,  
64 Then a long running over flat stones  
65 Before descending to the alluvial plain,  
66 To the clay banks, and the wild grapes hanging from the elmtrees.

67 The slightly trembling water

Because the river turned in on itself, the theme of the unfamiliar continues, but focuses more on the aspect of death. When the shadows retreat within the trees the speaker becomes weightless. This implies that continues moving forward until death, a notion reinforced by the forward movement of the current. Images of Hades become transparent from this section of the stanza. In this passage, the “alluvial plain” is reminiscent of the field of asphodel and the “wild grapes hanging” and “trembling water” leaves the reader with thoughts of Tantalus’ punishment in Tartarus. However, the speaker claims that death is a renewing process in life, a feature that could be observed in the next stanza of the poem.

77 I am renewed by death, thought of my death,  
78 The dry scent of a dying garden in September,  
79 The wind fanning the ash of a low fire.

Several examples are then given, such as a garden in autumn or ashes from a low burning fire. Gardens being able to flourish again in the spring and ashes becoming fertilizer, as well as an allusion to the mythical phoenix, reborn from its ashes displayed how closely life and death are related. So when the speaker claimed, “I am renewed by death, thought of my death”, the thoughts of his own death become a rejuvenating process for his soul.

In the final part of the poem, part 4, the speaker considers himself to be lost. A lost soul on the open sea is a frightening concept; however, the speaker appears to make another biblical allusion. In the book of *Genesis*, the earth appeared to consist only of ocean: “And God said: ‘let there be space to separate the water from the

water,”<sup>22</sup> and “And God said: ‘let the waters beneath the sky be gathered in one place so dry ground may appear’”<sup>23</sup>. Following this line of thought, one can infer that the speaker seeks out God, an interpretation that may have referred to the “old man” in line 87 of Roethke’s poem later in the same stanza.

87    A man faced with his own immensity

By turning to God, the speaker realizes that death is unavoidable, but not awful. By facing the “immensity” of God, one draws closer to nature by understanding why there is life. To know God as an absolute, the reader begins to understand the relationship of life and death as a continuous cycle, with one constantly bleeding into another; yet, Roethke does see an end to this cycle. For God holds the ultimate position as the “end of things”. As a final cap to this poem, the speaker claims, “All finite things reveal infinitude” in line 94. With this phrase, the speaker imparts some theological philosophy by implying that as one became closer to death, eternity follows not far behind.

The third and final poem explored is Roethke’s “Infirmity”. From the start of the poem, the speaker appeared to make a comment on the current human condition.

1    In purest song one plays the constant fool  
2    As changes shimmer in the inner eye.  
3    I stare and stare into a deepening pool  
4    And tell myself my image cannot die.  
5    I love myself: that's my one constancy.  
6    Oh, to be something else, yet still to be!<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Every Man's Bible, New Living Translation (2004). Genesis 1:7. Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers

<sup>23</sup> Every Man's Bible, New Living Translation (2004). Genesis 1:9. Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers

<sup>24</sup> Roethke, Theodore. "Infirmity." In *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, 236. New York--London:

In the third and fourth verses of the poem, the speaker makes an obvious reference to Narcissus, as the speaker stares at his own reflection in a pool of water, similar to the Narcissus myth. The speaker then expands the myth further by claiming, “my image cannot die.” Here, the speaker emphasizes that even though things around him may change, his image would live on forever, even beyond death. Defying death even further, the speaker conveys that “lov[ing] [him]self” was the only thing not to change and the only thing to matter. Like those of modern society, the speaker could not care about the finer things in life other than beauty and its preservation, especially the beauty of the body. The first two verses, however, appear to comment sarcastically about the rest of the stanza. In thinking about beauty, a transcendental concept hard to define on the philosophical level, the speaker claims that man was a “constant fool” whenever he attempts to define indefinable concepts. As mentioned, the comment portrays a sarcastic tone because the narrator redefines something to be unchangeable, such as beauty. This claim, in turn, makes the poet a fool. So, for a person to say that the image is immortal suggests that that person is only a fool for ignoring death and change. George Wendt claims in his dissertation on Roethke, “a loss of identity, a frightening death of the self, is a prerequisite for love”<sup>25</sup>. Through Wendt’s comment, the sarcasm displayed from Roethke’s style can be seen as actual contempt for holding onto vanity. So in

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Anchor Books, an imprint of Doubleday, 1975. Full poem in APPENDIX A

<sup>25</sup> Wendt, George Frederick. *The Death Motif in the Love Poems of Theodore Roethke* Dissertation Abstracts International, Edited by George Frederick Wendt and George Frederick Wendt, 1981. Reprint, Cambridge : ProQuest LLC, 2009: 1.

Roethke's mind, love appears only when the selfishness and high regard for physical beauty is cast from the hearts of men.

The next verse in the poem followed a similar tone to that of the first two lines of the stanza. Within this section, the title of the poem becomes relevant when speaker mentions some unknown, fatal infirmity.

7 Sweet Christ, rejoice in my infirmity;  
8 There's little left I care to call my own.  
9 Today they drained the fluid from a knee  
10 And pumped a shoulder full of cortisone;

By describing the effects that the disease had on his body, this stanza contradicts the majority of the previous verse, which exalted beauty. When most diseases tend to make the body fragile and with pallor less vibrant, this section of the poem praises the illness. This comparison sustains the Narcissus motif from earlier by directly contrasting what the poet deems to be beautiful. Instead of physical health, the poet wishes to convey that true beauty lies in illness.

In the Narcissus myth, a woman named Echo fell in love with a man, Narcissus, but she was doomed to repeat whatever anyone said to her as a response. The poem retains the sarcasm, but the main concepts praised, beauty and sickness, share opposite sides of the same coin. Because beauty and illness are so interrelated, the poet creates a false echo of the first stanza. Even though this echoes falsely of what the poet established, the speaker portrays illness as the true voice by saying the closer he is to death, the closer he is to God. The speaker declared that he "conform[s] to divinity," in living with his disease. According to the Bible, conforming to God's laws brings one closer to God. If nearing to God is the goal, then the closer one approaches death, the closer one draws to God. Moreover, if the

image of beauty is unchanging and undying, then the further one will be from God by attempting to preserve one's beauty. Thus, the second stanza appears to become the actual voice, rather than the echo.

The next verse continues the focus of presenting the divinity as weak. In relation to the thoughts of what is eternal from the first stanza, the third section focuses on the interminable thoughts of life itself.

- 13 The instant ages on the living eye;
- 14 Light on its rounds, a pure extreme of light
- 15 Breaks on me as my meager flesh breaks down---
- 16 The soul delights in that extremity.
- 17 Blessed the meek; they shall inherit wrath;
- 18 I'm son and father of my only death.

In the first line, the image of brevity is expounded upon, and brief moments of time gave the impression of maturity and old age, upon living people. With thousands upon thousands of such moments, life appears unending to those living. Through these moments, the speaker claims, "the soul delights in that extremity." By enjoying the oxymoronic concepts of eternal instants, life can be experienced. Upon reflection of this thought, elements of enjoying the here and now become present. The theme of enjoying all moments that life has to offer is reminiscent of Epicurean thought, which continue throughout this stanza. Within the next verse the speaker parodies Bible scripture: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."<sup>26</sup> The speaker replaces "earth" with "wrath", and recalls Lucretius' philosophy, that people, such as the sick would be better off dead as they are unable to enjoy life to the fullest. Moreover, it reinforces Lucretius' view to enjoy the excesses that life has

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<sup>26</sup> Every Man's Bible, New Living Translation (2004). Matthew 5:5. Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers

to offer, for the meek will be only miserable.

multo igitur mortem minus ad nos esse putandumst,  
si minus esse potest quam quod nil esse videmus;  
maior enim turbae disiectus material  
consequitur leto, nec quisquam expergitus exstat,  
frigida quem semel est vitae pausa secuta. (3.926-930)<sup>27</sup>

“Death therefore must be thought of much less moment to us, if there can be anything less than what we see to be nothing; for a greater dispersion of the disturbed matter takes place at death, and no one awakens and rises whom the cold stoppage of life has once overtaken”

Referring to the Lucretian quotation from the third chapter in the *De Rerum Natura* helps emphasize the interpretation of the stanza from earlier. The perversion of the Bible continued with the final verse where the poet declares that he is, “son and father of [his] only death”. In other words, the poet decided when he would die. Due only to the weakness associated with infirmity, would the poet cease to enjoy life. The line also elevates the poet to a godlike status, which further stress the poet’s authority over his life.

The next stanza continues with theme of eternity by referring to line 13.

13 The instant ages on the living eye

Likewise in line 21 the poet supports the claim of eternity with brevity.

21 The eternal seeks, and finds, the temporal,

Here the poet reiterates how eternity is found in the brief, fleeting moments of life.

Within this brief, short line, there is comfort in knowing that the source of eternity is actively looking for the brief, short lives of men. In his article on Roethke’s metaphysics, Blessing claimed that this section of the poem alluded to God, who,

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<sup>27</sup> Lucretius Carus, Titus. *De rerum natura / Lucretius ; with an English translation by W. H. D. Rouse ; rev. with new text, introd., notes, and index by Martin Ferguson Smith*. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press ; London : Heinemann, 1975.

“has sought and found him, that he has inherited wrath not love.”<sup>28</sup> During this section, Roethke presents a defined argument in favor of religion as a means to cope with death. The previous stanza reveals that the illness that the speaker mentions as a hardship became a blessing from God, and could arguably be a form of mercy in His eyes. In making this reference to God, the poet reiterates his desire to be closer to God by drawing closer to death. Therefore, the speaker’s illness becomes a benediction meant to bring him closer to God. In the same article, Blessing continues this train of thought by saying, “the prison of self love is ‘broken’”<sup>29</sup> referring to the metaphor of Narcissus from the beginning of the poem. Returning to the myth, Narcissus was so in love with his own image that he stared into a reflecting pool for the remainder of his life. Here, Roethke, breaks the hold that conceit holds on life.

In the penultimate section of the poem, the speaker returns to the echo reference by combining it to with his earlier thoughts about eternity.

28 My ears still hear the bird when all is still;  
 29 My soul is still my soul, and still the Son,  
 30 And knowing this, I am not yet undone.

A reading of this passage reveals the repetition of the word *still*. According to the dictionary, “still” means motionless and is synonymous with *at rest*. Considering this word, the reader can infer stillness brought by death. On the other hand, the speaker was able to, “still hear the bird”, despite the motionlessness around him. Here, in this moment, the poet illustrates that even on his deathbed, he continues to cling to his soul. This thought is sustained and broadened in the following line, where the

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<sup>28</sup> Blessing, Richaard A. “Theodore Roethke’s Sometimes Metaphysical Motion.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 14, no. 4 (January 1, 1973): 740. doi:10.2307/40754238.

<sup>29</sup> Blessing, Richaard A. “Theodore Roethke’s Sometimes Metaphysical Motion.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 14, no. 4 (January 1, 1973): 740. doi:10.2307/40754238.



speaker literally states, “my soul is still my soul.” Yet, the speaker does not deny that his soul is close to God. This one thought echoes another from earlier in the poem, where it is implied that becoming closer to God is the poet’s purpose in life. In drawing near to God, the speaker found eternity by saying, “I am not yet undone.” Through this verse, the speaker reiterates his thoughts from earlier about, “the eternal seeks, and finds, the temporal”. This idea can be taken to mean that he found eternity at the instant of his death. By repeating the major themes presented throughout the poem, the poet reveals the reflection of this passage; thus, there was not only a visible echo, but also an echo of the whole poem.

Within the final stanza of the poem, the speaker then begins describing the eternity he reached.

31 Things without hands take hands: there is no choice,---  
32 Eternity's not easily come by  
33 When opposites come suddenly in place,  
34 I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see  
35 How body from spirit slowly does unwind  
36 Until we are pure spirit at the end.

The poet elaborates on the Narcissus allusion, as he converses the inevitability of death by writing, “there is no choice,” as if to claim that nothing can last forever, including his “image [that] cannot die”. But suffice it to say, the speaker does not deny the nonexistence of eternity. He alludes to the notion that it is difficult to achieve as noted in line 32.

32 Eternity's not easily come by

This section of the stanza reflects the Christian doctrine that only through Christ is eternity achieved. The allusion to Christianity continues when he states, “I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see”. By using a mixed metaphor, the speaker was making a

confession of faith, much like when Christ declared that man is to “Come, follow [Him]”<sup>30</sup> by relying on the command given to believe in Him rather than relying on what there is to see. Also, in 2 Corinthians Paul wrote, “For it is by faith that we walk and not by sight.”<sup>31</sup> The final two lines of the poem take on a more Lucretian quality; however, they continue to retain the Christian undertones, revealed by the biblical references to faith. Lucretius’ influence is apparent with the images of the body breaking down and turning into energy; but the poet goes further when he writes that he is “pure spirit” rather than physical energy.

In summation, Roethke shared many Epicurean themes not only to show contrast, but also to emphasize the material nature of the body. In other words, Roethke saw Lucretius as halfway correct. Although Roethke presented a gloomy outlook that at times caricatured the Bible, he used biblical references to show contrast to Lucretius by illustrating how one was redeemed by the work and words of Christ. Therefore to die in an instant for Christ is to live eternally in heaven.

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<sup>30</sup> Every Man's Bible, New Living Translation (2004). Matthew 4:19. Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers

<sup>31</sup> Every Man's Bible, New Living Translation (2004). 2 Corinthians 5:7. Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers

## CHAPTER 3

### Walt Whitman

Finally Walt Whitman provides a unique outlook on death. As claimed earlier, Theodore Roethke and Walt Whitman have apparent similarities as abrupt, sharp-edged authors, or authors who tend to blur the lines between life and death. Yet both authors held differing views on how death should be examined, despite their similarities in themes and style. While Roethke held onto a more hopeful, religious outlook on death, Whitman had a more contentious, pragmatic view. To Whitman, death is something to be denied and resisted. For this concept to work, Whitman presents poetical themes with, “victory over death,”<sup>32</sup> and he used religion as a means to promote this point of view. Compared to Lucretius, Whitman had a background similar to that of Roethke by having some knowledge of Lucretius’ philosophy. Much like Lucretius, Whitman presents to his readers that death was not to be feared; however, he openly denied Lucretius’ beliefs on immortality. Jacobson in his essay on the relationship between Whitman and Lucretius claimed that Whitman had some knowledge of his works. In the article, Jacobson examines Whitman’s allusion to the *De Rerum Natura* in the opening to “Passage to India”<sup>33</sup>.

“As a projectile form'd, impell'd, passing a certain line, still keeps on, So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past” (Whitman 1892)

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<sup>32</sup> Whicher, Stephen E. "Whitman's Awakening to Death: Toward a Biographical Reading of 'out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'." *Studies in romanticism* I, (1961): 10.

<sup>33</sup> Jacobson, Howard. "Passage to India": *Whitman and Lucretius*. *Walt Whitman quarterly review* 17, (2000): 121.

Praeterea si iam finitum constituatur  
omne quod est spatium, siquis procurrat ad oras  
ultimas extremas iaciatque volatile telum,  
id validis utrum contortum viribus ire  
quo fuerit missum mavis longeque volare,  
an prohibere aliquid censes obstareque posse? (1.969-974)<sup>34</sup>

“Besides, if all the existing space be granted for the moment to be finite, suppose someone proceeded to the very furthest edge and cast a flying lance, do you prefer that the lance forcibly thrown goes whither it was sent and flies afar, or do you think that anything can hinder and obstruct it?”

A review of these different passages on infinity reveals the similarities between the two works. From this examination, it can be inferred that Whitman was familiar with and had working knowledge of Lucretius' works.

In the poem “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”, Whitman told the tale of two birds and a boy, with death as its central theme. The poem begins with a child waking up to a mocking bird's song.

1 Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,  
2 Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle<sup>35</sup>

From these first few lines, the reader can grasp the concept of infancy and nature. With this infancy, comes the inference of the innocence of the boy in the poem and also the implications that nature and innocence are connected. Several lines later, however, the poet ages the boy to a mature adult, who begins to reminisce about his childhood and lost innocence.

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<sup>34</sup>Lucretius Carus, Titus. *De rerum natura / Lucretius ; with an English translation by W. H. D. Rouse ; rev. with new text, introd., notes, and index by Martin Ferguson Smith*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press ; London : Heinemann, 1975.

<sup>35</sup> Whitman, Walt. "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." In *Leaves of Grass: Including Sands at Seventy...1st Annex, Good-Bye My Fancy...2d Annex, a Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads, and Portrait from Life*, 196. Philadelphia: David McKay, Publisher, 1891. See the Full poem in APPENIX B.

8 From the memories of the bird that chanted to me,  
9 From your memories sad brother, from the fitful risings and fallings I  
heard,  
10 From under that yellow half-moon late-risen and swollen as if with  
tears,  
11 From those beginning notes of yearning and love there in the mist,  
12 From the thousand responses of my heart never to cease,  
13 From the myriad thence-arous'd words,  
14 From the word stronger and more delicious than any,  
15 From such as now they start the scene revisiting,

As the poet recalls childhood, the verse reveals what the man has come to learn and what innocence he lost. Here, the authorial voice established how the nature of love and death become interrelated with maturity. Stephen Whicher in his commentary claimed that Whitman wanted to present death, "as reality, the 'real reality' that completes the reality of love."<sup>36</sup> Whitman intends to present death and love as natural occurrences and not as some promise. The resemblance of beliefs in Roethke and Whitman become evident because both poets make it seem that death is an everyday occurrence and a natural process; yet, both take different approaches to interpreting that belief. Whitman takes a more nihilistic view of things by implying that death was just part of life, compared with Roethke's view that death was communion with God. This difference is evident in the following lines of the poem.

18 A man, yet by these tears a little boy again,  
19 Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,  
20 I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,

From these lines, Whitman reveals a claim that death is just a part of life, much like falling in love. With pain being an integral part of death,

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<sup>36</sup> Whicher, Stephen E. "Whitman's Awakening to Death: Toward a Biographical Reading of 'out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'." *Studies in romanticism* I, (1961): 26.

In the next several stanzas, the poet maintained the theme of the pains, and joys of life by describing a relationship with a mockingbird couple. To portray this scene, the poet returns to his childhood as he remembers observing this couple.

35 Two together!  
36 Winds blow south, or winds blow north,  
37 Day come white, or night come black,  
38 Home, or rivers and mountains from home,  
39 Singing all time, minding no time,  
40 While we two keep together.

From the verse, the quality of love that the two birds shared for one another becomes apparent. The birds then become symbols for human beings as they live their lives and experience love. Again, the poet portrays this theme that love and death are part of life. But to portray the pain that one endured in life, the poet illustrates that the she-bird never returned to the nest.

42 May-be kill'd, unknown to her mate,  
43 One forenoon the she-bird crouch'd not on the nest,  
44 Nor return'd that afternoon, nor the next,  
45 Nor ever appear'd again.

As the speaker notes, the female bird did not return and presumed that she may have died. After this scene, a substantial part of the poem is a song offered by the surviving male bird singing out to his lost love, trying to call out to her. Here within the he-bird's song the poet broaches the topic of death:

99 Shake out carols!  
100 Solitary here, the night's carols!  
101 Carols of lonesome love! death's carols!  
102 Carols under that lagging, yellow, waning moon!  
103 O under that moon where she droops almost down into the sea!  
104 O reckless despairing carols.

Within this section of the poem, there appears a presence of both love and death; both of life's joys and pains. Again, Whitman draws the conclusion that death was

just a facet of nature. With this song he demonstrates that happiness and grief are not mutual but closely interrelated as illustrated by the mockingbirds. Additionally, Whitman presented another concept besides uniting the themes of love and death, a concept that, according to Whicher, Whitman “denies the finality of death.”<sup>37</sup> Judging by the he-bird’s decree to see his mate again reflected Whitman’s attempt to defy death as an end to all. In contrast to Roethke, who seemed to accept death as a means for a new beginning, Whitman defies the end and instead searched for means to prolong life and all of its good.

Once the mockingbird’s song ends, the resistance to death continues in the poet’s lines about life. Here the poet appears as a man again, rather than as a boy and with the transition, he is accompanied by maturity and loss.

144 Demon or bird! (said the boy's soul,)  
145 Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?  
146 For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I have heard  
you,  
147 Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,  
148 And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder  
and more sorrowful than yours,  
149 A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to  
die.

Within this passage, the speaker laments the loss of his innocence and youth, as was the price for his maturity. Whether the poet lost a loved one or is mourning a metaphorical death, the form that his innocence encompassed cannot be determined. In this, he develops a kinship with the male bird, as both images are grieving. A major difference, however, was that the man attempts to “conquer”

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<sup>37</sup> Whicher, Stephen E. "Whitman's Awakening to Death: Toward a Biographical Reading of 'out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'." *Studies in romanticism* I, (1961): 11.

death rather than to allow death to overtake him.

160 A word then, (for I will conquer it,)  
161 The word final, superior to all,  
162 Subtle, sent up---what is it?---I listen;  
163 Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you sea-waves?  
164 Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands?

Rather than accept death and all that it brought, Whitman wants human beings to rise up and beat down the clutches of death. Even though the speaker could listen to a small part of nature through the bird's tragic love, he believed that he could conquer death in a way much akin to choosing whom to love. Yet, not the bird answered the poet's call, but the sea itself.

168 Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,  
169 And again death, death, death, death,  
170 Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous'd child's heart

As a representation of nature, the sea is a vast, powerful body. Through this image, Whitman portrays the futility of the speaker's claims to master death by asking how could one master the sea. In this comparison of the sea and death, Whitman displays the reality that death was a part of everyday life. In the last stanza of the poem, the poet resigns himself to his fate.

178 My own songs awaked from that hour,  
179 And with them the key, the word up from the waves,  
180 The word of the sweetest song and all songs,  
181 That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,  
182 (Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments, bending aside,)

To the reader, these verses demonstrate a complete reversal to the hostility displayed against death in the preceding stanzas. The speaker becomes more appreciative of logic behind death, an approach that could be observed in lines 182



with cradle image.

178 (Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet  
garments, bending aside,)

Through the image of the crone and cradle, Whitman revealed the truth behind death by implying that a constant cycle between the new and the old occurs through the nature of death.

Whitman's poem six of his *Leaves of Grass*, "A Child said 'What is the Grass?'" can be seen as a commentary on the deeds of men in their lifetimes. The poem begins as Whitman used childhood curiosity to set the stage for a more metaphorical exploration.

A child said, 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.<sup>38</sup>

Comparing "What is the Grass" to "A Cradle Endlessly Rocking" reveals that this poem tends to focus on the beauty of death rather than just viewing death as merely the end point. To emphasize this argument, the previous verse allows the speaker to turn the grass into metaphor for the beauty of death. The grass is interpreted as a metaphor in the following stanza.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,  
A scented gift and remembrancer, designedly dropt,  
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and  
remark, and say, Whose?  
Or I guess the grass itself is itself a child, the produced babe of the  
vegetation.

In this passage, the poet wants to show that grass has become a monument to the achievements of those before us. For example, the "Lord's handkerchief" image of

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<sup>38</sup> Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*:6. Philadelphia: D. McKay, Washington Square, 1900. See the full poem in APPENDIX B.

the grass becomes a representation of God's accomplishments in creating the world. Along the same lines, the child image displayed the achievement of couples creating new life. In becoming the monuments of the previous generation, the grass began to serve as a reminder of where the roots of current society lie. In the following stanza, grass becomes a monument to the ideals that men have created.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic;  
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones  
Growing among black folks as among white

Within these verses, the grass symbolizes the ideals that men created to help their lives run smoothly, by referring to language and democracy. Both concepts came from a desire to understand one another better. The images described, from language to unity among the people, explain how man built upon the accomplishments provided by his predecessors. Whitman conveys the dependence of the current generation on the building blocks and accomplishments of others. This concept then becomes a transition point for the next part of the poem.

In the latter half of the poem, the speaker begins to address how the grass became a symbol for those departed, rather than a representation of the predecessors.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves  
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men;  
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them;  
It may be you are from old people, and from women, and from the  
    offspring taken soon out of their mother's laps;  
And here you are the mothers' laps.

In this segment the grass no longer represented ideals or achievements, but it represents death. Here a reader could envision how the dead passed on their beliefs, their ideals, or their performed deeds, or even their potential to do well. By looking

at the people, the poet moved away from the surface of history and into the depth and personalities behind each individual who had come before. By actually looking at the faces behind the accomplishments, Desiree Henderson claimed that Whitman “promotes a vision of the afterlife as benevolent and even desirable.”<sup>39</sup> From here on out, grass becomes a symbol for how the current, living generation depends on the past, as grass begins to grow over the dead.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues!  
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

With this image of dependency on previous generations, Whitman wants the reader to understand that death is “the great equalizer”<sup>40</sup> between the experiences of the previous generation and the youthfulness of the current one. The only downside, however, to this image or concept is that the current generation may be left with gaps in knowledge or may need to consider what to do next in life.

I wish I could Translate the hints about the dead young men and women,  
And the hints about old men and mothers,  
and the offspring taken soon out of their laps

Even though depending on the past generations may seem like a problem, Whitman apparently saw the merit of such issues, for the following stanza reveals to the reader the answer to such a question.

The smallest spout 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

In these verses, the speaker conveys to the reader that the issues of missing

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<sup>39</sup> Henderson, Desirée. ““What Is the Grass?”: The Roots of Walt Whitman's Cemetery Meditation.” *Walt Whitman quarterly review* 25, no. 3 (2008): 99.

<sup>40</sup> Henderson, Desirée. ““What Is the Grass?”: The Roots of Walt Whitman's Cemetery Meditation.” *Walt Whitman quarterly review* 25, no. 3 (2008): 100.

information and experiences are all part of the process needed by the current generation to create its own accomplishments and understanding. There also appears to be Whitman's theme of denying the end that death brings. Through this passage, Whitman states much of what society has become today is "led forward" by those that came before us. The end of the poem served as the perfect summation for this theme by claiming that even though death was a constant process in life, those who have died are now immortalized by what society presently is.

The last poem of Walt Whitman's for this study is "Death's Valley." This poem is startlingly accompanied by the painting of George Inness, 'The Valley of the shadow of Death.'<sup>41</sup>



Figure 1: The Valley of the Shadow of Death, Innes

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<sup>41</sup> *The Valley of the shadow of Death by George Inness*

Whitman was asked to accompany the portrait with an original poem. Upon the examining the portrait, a lone figure becomes apparent at the entrance to a dark, foreboding valley. In this dark, depressing background, a small cross stands out among the clouds, and the cross appears to shine a light upon the figure. After reading the poem, "Death's Valley," Whitman provides an account of a near death experience, yet in this event the poet mentions finding God. Whitman uses this painting as a springboard for expressing his opinion on accepting death.

In this poem, Whitman illustrates the beauty of death, despite all of the ugliness that follows. The speaker establishes his credentials on death within the first stanza.

I, hoverer of late by this dark valley, by its confines, having glimpses of it,  
Here enter lists with thee, claiming my right to make a symbol too.<sup>42</sup>

At once, the poet portrays death as a deep, dark place with no exit, a vision that serves as an excellent representation. Yet in portraying death as an inescapable valley, the poet claims that he just hovers over the point of no return, a notion that helps to serve as a reminder that death has a constant presence in our lives.

For I have seen many wounded soldiers die,  
And dread suffering - have seen their lives pass off with smiles;  
And I have watch'd the death-hours of the old; and seen the infant die;  
The rich, with all his nurses and his doctors;  
And then the poor, in meagerness and poverty

According to Harold Apitz in William Scheick's commentary, the Civil War brought

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<sup>42</sup> Whitman, Walt. "Death's Valley." In *The Complete Poems (Penguin Classics)*: Penguin. See full poem in APPENDIX B.

about “cultural anxieties” (Scheick 2004)<sup>43</sup> about dying. With the constant presence of death, individuals instinctively attempt to avoid any part of it, lest he or she succumb to death as well.

And I myself for long, O Death, have breath'd my every breath  
Amid the nearness and the silent thought of thee

However, Scheick argues that Whitman and his contemporaries try to alleviate the public's anxiety by displaying “‘a beautiful' death”<sup>44</sup> and thus attempting to modernize Christian ideals. In this poem, Whitman reveals a few of these ideals, not necessarily as a believer, but more for comfort, such as lack of fear over death. He empathizes with the concerns of society but did not broach a Christian viewpoint.

And out of these and thee,  
I make a scene, a song (not fear of thee,  
Nor gloom's ravines, nor bleak, nor dark - for I do not fear thee,  
Nor celebrate the struggle, or contortion, or hard-tied knot),

In the aforementioned passage we find an example of the narrator utilizing the ideal that death is not a menacing concept. In such a way, this notion could be seen as the speaker's constant struggle to overcome death by reducing its hold over people. To do this, the authorial voice revealed that death did not necessarily have to be final.

And the low hum of living breeze - and in the midst God's beautiful eternal  
right hand,  
Thee, holiest minister of Heaven - thee, envoy, usherer, guide at last of all,  
Rich, florid, loosener of the stricture-knot call'd life,  
Sweet, peaceful, welcome Death.

Here in the final lines of the poem, the speaker turns to the Christian ideals that death is not the end, but a beginning to a new and better life. Through the narrator,

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<sup>43</sup> Scheick, William J. "Aspiz, Harold. So Long!: Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death [Review]." *Walt Whitman quarterly review* 21, no. 3 (2004): 173.

<sup>44</sup> Scheick, William J. "Aspiz, Harold. So Long!: Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death [Review]." *Walt Whitman quarterly review* 21, no. 3 (2004): 173-175.

Whitman again reveals his defiance of death in the speaker's song, which continues on into the preceding verse in which he welcomed death. By welcoming death, the poet finally overcomes the finality of death by claiming that it is now the beginning.

After examining the three works by Walt Whitman, a common theme can be seen throughout the poems. Whitman conveys to his audience that death should not be seen as a part of life. At no point did anybody sign a contract to end his or her life, and so Whitman's solution is to fight it and hope to discover a small victory. The victory Whitman, personally, discovered was religion, as it provides some form of assurance of life after death, a more pragmatic view of religion rather than a view of comfort.

## CONCLUSION

All three poets present personal perspectives and opinions on death. From denying both the existence of an afterlife and to believing in an all-powerful deity, one-thing authors convey in their respective works is lack of fear. Even though death implies a sense of uncertainty and foreboding, Lucretius, Roethke, and Whitman presented individually why death should not be feared as a means to allay any concerns about death, whether it is pain, a sense of identity, or a feeling of inevitability. To each author, death was but a moment in time that affected the corporeal form; thus, one should have no cause for fear. Mainly, the source in contention lay within the spirit and consciousness after death. If the spirit died with the body, or the spirit continued to live on with an immortal creator, the certainty of either belief was unattainable until death. Each philosophy, however, alleviated a certain aspect of life for different groups of people. There is a famous quotation from Franklin Delano Roosevelt that seems to fit this analysis, “the only thing to fear is fear itself.”<sup>45</sup> Reflecting on this simple, yet effective quotation, each of the three poets would agree on some level with Roosevelt’s denial of the terror that death inspires. In concluding remarks, poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote a few poems that combine the ideas of Lucretius, Roethke, and Whitman. In the “The Leaden

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<sup>45</sup> Houck, Davis W. *FDR and Fear Itself: The First Inaugural Address*. Library of Presidential Rhetoric xii, 166 p. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002.  
<http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/004264535>.



Echo", Hopkins describes the effects of age and death: however, when coupled with the "The Golden Echo", the individual views are observed.

26 Of us, the wimpled-water-dimpled, not-by-morning-matched face,  
27 The flower of beauty, fleece of beauty, too too apt to, ah! to fleet,  
28 Never fleets móre, fastened with the tenderest truth  
29 To its own best being and its loveliness of youth: it is an  
everlastingness of, O it is an all youth!<sup>46</sup>

In this small passage from "The Golden Echo", Hopkins established an Epicurean lifestyle, one that exalts living for the moment and maximum enjoyment, as noticed by the final line in the verse. Living a fulfilling life leads one to a more accepting death.

31 Winning ways, airs innocent, maiden manners, sweet looks, loose  
locks, long locks, lovelocks, gaygear, going gallant, girlgrace---  
32 Resign them, sign them, seal them, send them, motion them with  
breath,  
33 And with sighs soaring, soaring síghs deliver  
34 Them; beauty-in-the-ghost, deliver it, early now, long before death  
35 Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty's self  
and beauty's giver

The next passage in the poem provided lyrical summation of finding peace in God, which was expounded upon by Roethke in his works. By turning to religion, in this case Christianity, Hopkins displayed an enhanced and peaceful state of being after death.

43 When the thing we freely fórfeit is kept with fonder a care,  
44 Fonder a care kept than we could have kept it, kept  
45 Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it) finer, fonder  
46 A care kept.---Where kept? Do but tell us where kept, where.---  
47 Yonder.---What high as that! We follow, now we follow.---  
48 Yonder, yes yonder, yonder,  
49 Yonder.

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<sup>46</sup> Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "36 the Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo (Maidens' Song from St. Winefred's Well)." In *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Now First Published: Edited with Notes by Robert Bridges*, 55. London: Humphrey Milford, 1918. Full poem in APPENDIX C

In this final passage, the main concept illustrated Whitman's struggle against death, as the speaker attempted to retain life. The knowledge that death becomes an unavoidable force led men to perform unforgettable deeds and actions to be remembered by the ages. In essence, Hopkins' poem embraced all the views on death presented by Lucretius, Roethke, and Whitman, and even built upon those views. If a common theme could be summarized, it is that death holds no fear over men, but acts as a motivator for one to do his or her best in the life they are afforded.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: ROETHKE

### The Far Field

#### 1

1 I dream of journeys repeatedly:  
2 Of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel,  
3 Of driving alone, without luggage, out a long peninsula,  
4 The road lined with snow-laden second growth,  
5 A fine dry snow ticking the windshield,  
6 Alternate snow and sleet, no on-coming traffic,  
7 And no lights behind, in the blurred side-mirror,  
8 The road changing from glazed tarface to a rubble of stone,  
9 Ending at last in a hopeless sand-rut,  
10 Where the car stalls,  
11 Churning in a snowdrift  
12 Until the headlights darken.

#### 2

13 At the field's end, in the corner missed by the mower,  
14 Where the turf drops off into a grass-hidden culvert,  
15 Haunt of the cat-bird, nesting-place of the field-mouse,  
16 Not too far away from the ever-changing flower-dump,  
17 Among the tin cans, tires, rusted pipes, broken machinery,---  
18 One learned of the eternal;  
19 And in the shrunken face of a dead rat, eaten by rain and ground-beetles  
20 (I found it lying among the rubble of an old coal bin)  
21 And the tom-cat, caught near the pheasant-run,  
22 Its entrails strewn over the half-grown flowers,  
23 Blasted to death by the night watchman.

24 I suffered for birds, for young rabbits caught in the mower,  
25 My grief was not excessive.  
26 For to come upon warblers in early May  
27 Was to forget time and death:  
28 How they filled the oriole's elm, a twittering restless cloud, all one  
morning,  
29 And I watched and watched till my eyes blurred from the bird shapes,---  
30 Cape May, Blackburnian, Cerulean,---

31 Moving, elusive as fish, fearless,  
32 Hanging, bunched like young fruit, bending the end branches,  
33 Still for a moment,  
34 Then pitching away in half-flight,  
35 Lighter than finches,  
36 While the wrens bickered and sang in the half-green hedgerows,  
37 And the flicker drummed from his dead tree in the chicken-yard.

38 ---Or to lie naked in sand,  
39 In the silted shallows of a slow river,  
40 Fingering a shell,  
41 Thinking:  
42 Once I was something like this, mindless,  
43 Or perhaps with another mind, less peculiar;  
44 Or to sink down to the hips in a mossy quagmire;  
45 Or, with skinny knees, to sit astride a wet log,  
46 Believing:  
47 I'll return again,  
48 As a snake or a raucous bird,  
49 Or, with luck, as a lion.

50 I learned not to fear infinity,  
51 The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,  
52 The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,  
53 The wheel turning away from itself,  
54 The sprawl of the wave,  
55 The on-coming water.

### 3

56 The river turns on itself,  
57 The tree retreats into its own shadow.  
58 I feel a weightless change, a moving forward  
59 As of water quickening before a narrowing channel  
60 When banks converge, and the wide river whitens;  
61 Or when two rivers combine, the blue glacial torrent  
62 And the yellowish-green from the mountain upland,---  
63 At first a swift rippling between rocks,  
64 Then a long running over flat stones  
65 Before descending to the alluvial plain,  
66 To the clay banks, and the wild grapes hanging from the elmtrees.  
67 The slightly trembling water

68 Dropping a fine yellow silt where the sun stays;  
69 And the crabs bask near the edge,  
70 The weedy edge, alive with small snakes and bloodsuckers,---

71 I have come to a still, but not a deep center,  
72 A point outside the glittering current;  
73 My eyes stare at the bottom of a river,  
74 At the irregular stones, iridescent sandgrains,  
75 My mind moves in more than one place,  
76 In a country half-land, half-water.

77 I am renewed by death, thought of my death,  
78 The dry scent of a dying garden in September,  
79 The wind fanning the ash of a low fire.  
80 What I love is near at hand,  
81 Always, in earth and air.

#### 4

82 The lost self changes,  
83 Turning toward the sea,  
84 A sea-shape turning around,---  
85 An old man with his feet before the fire,  
86 In robes of green, in garments of adieu.

87 A man faced with his own immensity  
88 Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.  
89 The murmur of the absolute, the why  
90 Of being born fails on his naked ears.  
91 His spirit moves like monumental wind  
92 That gentles on a sunny blue plateau.  
93 He is the end of things, the final man.

94 All finite things reveal infinitude:  
95 The mountain with its singular bright shade  
96 Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,  
97 The after-light upon ice-burdened pines;  
98 Odor of basswood on a mountain-slope,  
99 A scent beloved of bees;  
100 Silence of water above a sunken tree:  
101 The pure serene of memory in one man,---  
102 A ripple widening from a single stone  
103 Winding around the waters of the world.

#### In a Dark Time

1 In a dark time, the eye begins to see,  
2 I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;

3 I hear my echo in the echoing wood---  
4 A lord of nature weeping to a tree.  
5 I live between the heron and the wren,  
6 Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.  
  
7 What's madness but nobility of soul  
8 At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!  
9 I know the purity of pure despair,  
10 My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.  
11 That place among the rocks---is it a cave,  
12 Or winding path? The edge is what I have.  
  
13 A steady storm of correspondences!  
14 A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,  
15 And in broad day the midnight come again!  
16 A man goes far to find out what he is---  
17 Death of the self in a long, tearless night,  
18 All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.  
  
19 Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.  
20 My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,  
21 Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is *I*?  
22 A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.  
23 The mind enters itself, and God the mind,  
24 And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

### **Infirmity**

1 In purest song one plays the constant fool  
2 As changes shimmer in the inner eye.  
3 I stare and stare into a deepening pool  
4 And tell myself my image cannot die.  
5 I love myself: that's my one constancy.  
6 Oh, to be something else, yet still to be!  
  
7 Sweet Christ, rejoice in my infirmity;  
8 There's little left I care to call my own.  
9 Today they drained the fluid from a knee  
10 And pumped a shoulder full of cortisone;  
11 Thus I conform to my divinity  
12 By dying inward, like an aging tree.  
  
13 The instant ages on the living eye;

14 Light on its rounds, a pure extreme of light  
15 Breaks on me as my meager flesh breaks down---  
16 The soul delights in that extremity.  
17 Blessed the meek; they shall inherit wrath;  
18 I'm son and father of my only death.

19 A mind too active is no mind at all;  
20 The deep eye sees the shimmer on the stone;  
21 The eternal seeks, and finds, the temporal,  
22 The change from dark to light of the slow moon,  
23 Dead to myself, and all I hold most dear,  
24 I move beyond the reach of wind and fire.

25 Deep in the greens of summer sing the lives  
26 I've come to love. A vireo whets its bill.  
27 The great day balances upon the leaves;  
28 My ears still hear the bird when all is still;  
29 My soul is still my soul, and still the Son,  
30 And knowing this, I am not yet undone.

31 Things without hands take hands: there is no choice,---  
32 Eternity's not easily come by.  
33 When opposites come suddenly in place,  
34 I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see  
35 How body from spirit slowly does unwind  
36 Until we are pure spirit at the end.



## APPENDIX B: WHITMAN

### **Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking**

1 Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,  
2 Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,  
3 Out of the Ninth-month midnight,  
4 Over the sterile sands and the fields beyond, where the child leaving his  
bed wander'd alone, bareheaded, barefoot,  
5 Down from the shower'd halo,  
6 Up from the mystic play of shadows twining and twisting as if they were  
alive,  
7 Out from the patches of briars and blackberries,  
8 From the memories of the bird that chanted to me,  
9 From your memories sad brother, from the fitful risings and fallings I  
heard,  
10 From under that yellow half-moon late-risen and swollen as if with tears,  
  
11 From those beginning notes of yearning and love there in the mist,  
12 From the thousand responses of my heart never to cease,  
13 From the myriad thence-arous'd words,  
14 From the word stronger and more delicious than any,  
15 From such as now they start the scene revisiting,  
16 As a flock, twittering, rising, or overhead passing,  
17 Borne hither, ere all eludes me, hurriedly,  
18 A man, yet by these tears a little boy again,  
19 Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,  
20 I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,  
21 Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,  
22 A reminiscence sing.  
  
23 Once Paumanok,  
24 When the lilac-scent was in the air and Fifth-month grass was growing,  
25 Up this seashore in some briars,  
26 Two feather'd guests from Alabama, two together,  
27 And their nest, and four light-green eggs spotted with brown,  
28 And every day the he-bird to and fro near at hand,  
29 And every day the she-bird crouch'd on her nest, silent, with bright eyes,  
30 And every day I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing them,  
31 Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating.  
  
32 *Shine! shine! shine!*  
33 *Pour down your warmth, great sun!*

34 *While we bask, we two together.*  
 35 *Two together!*  
 36 *Winds blow south, or winds blow north,*  
 37 *Day come white, or night come black,*  
 38 *Home, or rivers and mountains from home,*  
 39 *Singing all time, minding no time,*  
 40 *While we two keep together.*  
 41 Till of a sudden,  
 42 May-be kill'd, unknown to her mate,  
 43 One forenoon the she-bird crouch'd not on the nest,  
 44 Nor return'd that afternoon, nor the next,  
 45 Nor ever appear'd again.  
 46 And thenceforward all summer in the sound of the sea,  
 47 And at night under the full of the moon in calmer weather,  
 48 Over the hoarse surging of the sea,  
 49 Or flitting from brier to brier by day,  
 50 I saw, I heard at intervals the remaining one, the he-bird,  
 51 The solitary guest from Alabama.  
 52 *Blow! blow! blow!*  
 53 *Blow up sea-winds along Paumanok's shore;*  
 54 *I wait and I wait till you blow my mate to me.*  
 55 Yes, when the stars glisten'd,  
 56 All night long on the prong of a moss-scallop'd stake,  
 57 Down almost amid the slapping waves,  
 58 Sat the lone singer wonderful causing tears.  
 59 He call'd on his mate,  
 60 He pour'd forth the meanings which I of all men know.  
 61 Yes my brother I know,  
 62 The rest might not, but I have treasur'd every note,  
 63 For more than once dimly down to the beach gliding,  
 64 Silent, avoiding the moonbeams, blending myself with the shadows,  
 65 Recalling now the obscure shapes, the echoes, the sounds and sights after  
 their sorts,  
 66 The white arms out in the breakers tirelessly tossing,  
 67 I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair,  
 68 Listen'd long and long.  
 69 Listen'd to keep, to sing, now translating the notes,

70 Following you my brother.  
 71 *Soothe! soothe! soothe!*  
 72 *Close on its wave soothes the wave behind,*  
 73 *And again another behind embracing and lapping, every one close,*  
 74 *But my love soothes not me, not me.*  
 75 *Low hangs the moon, it rose late,*  
 76 *It is lagging---O I think it is heavy with love, with love.*  
 77 *O madly the sea pushes upon the land,*  
 78 *With love, with love.*  
 79 *O night! do I not see my love fluttering out among the breakers?*  
 80 *What is that little black thing I see there in the white?*  
 81 *Loud! loud! loud!*  
 82 *Loud I call to you, my love!*  
 83 *High and clear I shoot my voice over the waves,*  
 84 *Surely you must know who is here, is here,*  
 85 *You must know who I am, my love.*  
 86 *Low-hanging moon!*  
 87 *What is that dusky spot in your brown yellow?*  
 88 *O it is the shape, the shape of my mate!*  
 89 *O moon do not keep her from me any longer.*  
 90 *Land! land! O land!*  
 91 *Whichever way I turn, O I think you could give me my mate back again if you*  
 92 *only would,*  
 93 *For I am almost sure I see her dimly whichever way I look.*  
 94 *O rising stars!*  
 95 *Perhaps the one I want so much will rise, will rise with some of you.*  
 96 *O throat! O trembling throat!*  
 97 *Sound clearer through the atmosphere!*  
 98 *Pierce the woods, the earth,*  
 99 *Somewhere listening to catch you must be the one I want.*  
 100 *Shake out carols!*  
 101 *Solitary here, the night's carols!*  
 102 *Carols of lonesome love! death's carols!*  
 103 *Carols under that lagging, yellow, waning moon!*  
 104 *O under that moon where she droops almost down into the sea!*

104 *O reckless despairing carols.*

105 *But soft! sink low!*

106 *Soft! let me just murmur,*

107 *And do you wait a moment you husky-nois'd sea,*

108 *For somewhere I believe I heard my mate responding to me,*

109 *So faint, I must be still, be still to listen,*

110 *But not altogether still, for then she might not come immediately to me.*

111 *Hither my love!*

112 *Here I am! here!*

113 *With this just-sustain'd note I announce myself to you,*

114 *This gentle call is for you my love, for you.*

115 *Do not be decoy'd elsewhere,*

116 *That is the whistle of the wind, it is not my voice,*

117 *That is the fluttering, the fluttering of the spray,*

118 *Those are the shadows of leaves.*

119 *O darkness! O in vain!*

120 *O I am very sick and sorrowful.*

121 *O brown halo in the sky near the moon, drooping upon the sea!*

122 *O troubled reflection in the sea!*

123 *O throat! O throbbing heart!*

124 *And I singing uselessly, uselessly all the night.*

125 *O past! O happy life! O songs of joy!*

126 *In the air, in the woods, over fields,*

127 *Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!*

128 *But my mate no more, no more with me!*

129 *We two together no more.*

130 *The aria sinking,*

131 *All else continuing, the stars shining,*

132 *The winds blowing, the notes of the bird continuous echoing,*

133 *With angry moans the fierce old mother incessantly moaning,*

134 *On the sands of Paumanok's shore gray and rustling,*

135 *The yellow half-moon enlarged, sagging down, drooping, the face of the sea almost touching,*

136 *The boy ecstatic, with his bare feet the waves, with his hair the atmosphere dallying,*

137 *The love in the heart long pent, now loose, now at last tumultuously bursting,*

138 *The aria's meaning, the ears, the soul, swiftly depositing,*

139 The strange tears down the cheeks coursing,  
140 The colloquy there, the trio, each uttering,  
141 The undertone, the savage old mother incessantly crying,  
142 To the boy's soul's questions sullenly timing, some drown'd secret hissing,  
143 To the outsetting bard.

144 Demon or bird! (said the boy's soul,)  
145 Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?  
146 For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I have heard you,  
147 Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,  
148 And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder and  
more sorrowful than yours,  
149 A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die.

150 O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,  
151 O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you,  
152 Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,  
153 Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,  
154 Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what there in  
the night,  
155 By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon,  
156 The messenger there arous'd, the fire, the sweet hell within,  
157 The unknown want, the destiny of me.

158 O give me the clew! (it lurks in the night here somewhere,)  
159 O if I am to have so much, let me have more!

160 A word then, (for I will conquer it,)  
161 The word final, superior to all,  
162 Subtle, sent up---what is it?---I listen;  
163 Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you sea-waves?  
164 Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands?

165 Where to answering, the sea,  
166 Delaying not, hurrying not,  
167 Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before day-break,  
168 Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,  
169 And again death, death, death, death,  
170 Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous'd child's heart,  
171 But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,  
172 Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,  
173 Death, death, death, death, death.

174 Which I do not forget,  
175 But fuse the song of my dusky demon and brother,  
176 That he sang to me in the moonlight on Paumanok's gray beach,

177 With the thousand responsive songs at random,  
178 My own songs awaked from that hour,  
179 And with them the key, the word up from the waves,  
180 The word of the sweetest song and all songs,  
181 That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,  
182 (Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments,  
bending aside,)  
183 The sea whisper'd me.

### **A Child Said, "What is the Grass"**

A child said, 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 dropped,  
Bearing the owner's name someway 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.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,  
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow  
zones,  
Growing among black folks as among white,  
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the  
same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,  
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,  
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them;  
It may be you are from old people and from women, and  
from offspring taken soon out of their mother's laps,  
And here you are the mother's laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old

mothers,  
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,  
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues!  
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths  
for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men  
and women,  
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring  
taken soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?  
What do you think has become of the women and  
children?

They are alive and well somewhere;  
The smallest sprouts show 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 ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward. . . and nothing collapses,  
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and  
luckier.

### **The Valley OF Death**

(TO ACCOMPANY A PICTURE; BY REQUEST. *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* , FROM THE PAINTING  
BY GEORGE INNESS)

Nay, do not dream, designer dark,  
Thou hast portray'd or hit thy theme entire;  
I, hoverer of late by this dark valley, by its confines, having glimpses of it,  
Here enter lists with thee, claiming my right to make a symbol too.

For I have seen many wounded soldiers die,  
And dread suffering - have seen their lives pass off with smiles;  
And I have watch'd the death-hours of the old; and seen the infant die;  
The rich, with all his nurses and his doctors;  
And then the poor, in meagerness and poverty;  
And I myself for long, O Death, have breath'd my every breath  
Amid the nearness and the silent thought of thee.

And out of these and thee,  
I make a scene, a song (not fear of thee,  
Nor gloom's ravines, nor bleak, nor dark - for I do not fear thee,  
Nor celebrate the struggle, or contortion, or hard-tied knot),  
Of the broad blessed light and perfect air, with meadows, rippling tides, and trees  
and flowers and grass,  
And the low hum of living breeze - and in the midst God's beautiful eternal right  
hand,  
Thee, holiest minister of Heaven - thee, envoy, usherer, guide at last of all,  
Rich, florid, loosener of the stricture-knot call'd life,  
Sweet, peaceful, welcome Death.



## APPENDIX C: HOPKINS

### The Leaden Echo

- 1    How to kéep---is there ány any, is there none such, nowhere known some,  
bow or brooch or braid or brace, láce, latch or catch or key to keep  
2    Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, . . . from vanishing away?  
3    Ó is there no frowning of these wrinkles, rankèd wrinkles deep,  
4    Dówn? no waving off of these most mournful messengers, still messengers,  
sad and stealing messengers of grey?  
5    No there's none, there's none, O no there's none,  
6    Nor can you long be, what you now are, called fair,  
7    Do what you may do, what, do what you may,  
8    And wisdom is early to despair:  
9    Be beginning; since, no, nothing can be done  
10   To keep at bay  
11   Age and age's evils, hoar hair,  
12   Ruck and wrinkle, drooping, dying, death's worst, winding sheets, tombs  
and worms and tumbling to decay;  
  
13   So be beginning, be beginning to despair.  
14   O there's none; no no no there's none:  
15   Be beginning to despair, to despair,  
16   Despair, despair, despair, despair.

### The Golden Echo

- 17   Spare!  
18   There ís one, yes I have one (Hush there!);  
19   Only not within seeing of the sun,  
20   Not within the singeing of the strong sun,  
21   Tall sun's tingeing, or treacherous the tainting of the earth's air,  
22   Somewhere elsewhere there is ah well where! one,  
23   One. Yes I can tell such a key, I do know such a place,  
24   Where whatever's prized and passes of us, everything that's fresh and fast  
flying of us, seems to us sweet of us and swiftly away with, done away with,  
undone,  
25   Undone, done with, soon done with, and yet dearly and dangerously sweet  
26   Of us, the wimpled-water-dimpled, not-by-morning-matchèd face,  
27   The flower of beauty, fleece of beauty, too too apt to, ah! to fleet,  
28   Never fleets móre, fastened with the tenderest truth

29 To its own best being and its loveliness of youth: it is an everlastingness of,  
 O it is an all youth!  
 30 Come then, your ways and airs and looks, locks, maiden gear, gallantry and  
 gaiety and grace,  
 31 Winning ways, airs innocent, maiden manners, sweet looks, loose locks,  
 long locks, lovelocks, gaygear, going gallant, girlgrace---  
 32 Resign them, sign them, seal them, send them, motion them with breath,  
 33 And with sighs soaring, soaring síghs deliver  
 34 Them; beauty-in-the-ghost, deliver it, early now, long before death  
 35 Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty's self and  
 beauty's giver.

36 See; not a hair is, not an eyelash, not the least lash lost; every hair  
 37 Is, hair of the head, numbered.  
 38 Nay, what we had lighthanded left in surly the mere mould  
 39 Will have waked and have waxed and have walked with the wind what  
 while we slept,  
 40 This side, that side hurling a heavyheaded hundredfold  
 41 What while we, while we slumbered.  
 42 O then, weary then why should we tread? O why are we so haggard at the  
 heart, so care-coiled, care-killed, so fagged, so fashed, so cogged, so  
 cumbered,  
 43 When the thing we freely fórfeit is kept with fonder a care,  
 44 Fonder a care kept than we could have kept it, kept  
 45 Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it) finer, fonder  
 46 A care kept.---Where kept? Do but tell us where kept, where.---  
 47 Yonder.---What high as that! We follow, now we follow.---  
 48 Yonder, yes yonder, yonder,  
 49 Yonder.

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