The Imagery of Death in Medieval Works

Özet


Anahtar Sözcükler: Ölüm, veba, açlık, Yüzyıl Savaşları, dini vecibeler, Ortaçağ edebiyatı

Abstract

Human beings live in a world beset by death. Although in general sense death is the absence of life, what it is can only be conjectured as a puzzle by the men of literature. In this context, rituals, symbols, and philosophical perspectives to death dwell on the cultural and physical aspects of death. On the other hand, a more precise language about death is used in the Bible, ecclesiastical texts, and chronicles.

Before a complex living system ceases functioning, or in modern sense, when the death of cells and tissues takes place with the biological death, man thinks of the reality of death, and he fears it. In Medieval times plague, which was a fatal and infectious disease, the Hundred Years’ Wars, and famine were constant reminders of death, and the shortness of life. In this context, some individuals gave up the values of morality to dwell on debauchery in this short life, but other individuals focused on the values of morality to go to Heaven. This article attempts to analyse in human terms the significance of death, the signs of death, and the responses to death.

Key Words: Death, plague, famine, Hundred Years’ Wars, religious verdicts, Medieval literature.

Man is the only creature which buries its dead. This activity presupposes some reflection and speculation about the nature and the cause of death. According to Christopher Daniell, the fact that man inter his dead can be interpreted as either originating from some instinctive inability on his part to accept the ocular evidence of physical disintegration, or as due to an equally instinctive hope for some post-mortem survival (Daniell, 1998, 30-59). Whatever man’s reactions may be in the face of Death, one may safely assume that it appeared to him as an overwhelming force which filled him with terror. In this article, the imagery of death in some Medieval literary works will be analysed. The impact of Christianity on the idea of death was visible for the idea of salvation of human beings in the sense that Christ was faced with lethal torture and he redeemed mankind on the cross, and rose from the dead and that St. John told a story of Lazarus, who was risen by Christ, and that the Revelation of St. John the Divine talked about death, as many other Biblical references (Paxton, 1996, 20-90). Furthermore, the black death, which confused the Medieval people with its sudden appearance or reappearance (Cantor, 2001, 82; Platt, 1996, 91) played a role in the formation of the idea of death.
because some individuals gave up their moral values because life was short, but others dwelled on religion and morality because Heaven was offered to them on condition that they were good (Benedictow, 2004, 97-101): “Manor rolls tell of untended fields, abandoned children, and even whole villages depopulated; some communities, unscathed by the Norman Conquest vanished from the map, wiped out by the black death” (Day, 1963, 57) and also many people died during the Hundred Years’ wars (1337-1453). As a result, upper middle and high class people, who had possessions, gave importance to wills and ordered the construction of their effigies and brasses, and people of all walks of life concentrated on the idea of death in literature, religion, and the manuscript illuminations (Gordon, 2000, 51-58).

In the ordinary process of life, every human being is more or less progressively introduced to the problem of suffering and death, and although its essential mysteriousness remains in spite of the fact that they are every time taken by surprise in the way it strikes—they rapidly come to the conclusion that for all their aversion to it, Death is an inescapable fact.

Rational man could not but recognise death as an inexorable certainty and, in order to quell his impotent and futile feeling of revolt, he softens his dread and grief over his impending destruction by rationalising and finding ways of accepting it. Poetry is one of the most effective ways of doing so. In his “Lament for the Makaris”, William Dunbar reflects on man’s inherent frailty before the Destroyer: “His awful strak may no man fle:/Timor mortis conturbat me” (Dunbar, 1932, 35-36). Similarly, Everyman learns that once he has heard the summons of Death there is no reprieve and no return, possible: the call is utterly irreversible:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Everyman: Death, if I should this pilgrimage take,} \\
\text{And my reckoning surely make,} \\
\text{Show me, for saint charity,} \\
\text{Should I not come again shortly?} \\
\text{Death: No, Everyman; and thou be once there,} \\
\text{Thou mayst never come here,} \\
\text{Trust me verily}
\end{align*}
\]

(Anonim, 1956, 146-152)

Isaiah too recognised the irrevocable nature of death as he says in the Bible: “I said, in the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the gates of the grave: I am deprived of the residue of my years” (Isaiah, 38, 10).

In one of the versions of Sir Orfeo story, Sir Orfeo also discovers that once Death has chosen its victim, there is no way of cheating it of its prey. When Dame Herodis tells him that she has been forewarned of her death in a dream, the desperate husband seeks advice, but can find no man to help him. Ultimately, he makes elaborate but useless preparations to defend her:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Amorwe the undertide is come} \\
\text{And Orfeo hath his armes y-nome,} \\
\text{-wele ten hundred knightes with him,} \\
\text{Ich y-armed stout and grim,} \\
\text{And with the quen werten he} \\
\text{Right unto that ympe-tre.} \\
\text{Thai made scheltrom in ich a side,} \\
\text{And said that wold there abide,} \\
\text{-dye ther everichon,}
\end{align*}
\]
Er the quen schuld fram hem gon.
Ac yete amiddes hem ful right
The quen was oway y-twight,
With fairi forth y-nome;
Me wist never wher sche was bicome
(Johnson-ed,1941,167-180)

Gautama Buddha, who, according to the legend was so carefully shielded in his youth against all manners of sufferings, was so shocked when he was finally and unexpectedly confronted by Death-the ultimate suffering—that he spent the remainder of his existence searching for the meaning of life. For the same reason, Gilgamesh was impelled to go in quest of immortality. Eventually, the Mesopotamian hero was told, in no uncertain terms, that he may as well make the best of his present life since Death is the common lot of man and the prerogative of the gods in Gilgamesh Epic:

The life which thou seekest thou wilt not find;
For when the gods created mankind,
They allotted death to mankind,
But life, they retained in their keeping
(Anonim, 1973, 36)

The Babylonians’ gods were not so different from the creator portrayed in Genesis:“And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken” (Genesis 3, 22-23) and lest man should forget his terrestrial inheritance, each year-during the imposition of the ashes, on Ash Wednesday-the Church puts on the lips of the celebrant these humbling words: “And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.” (Genesis 3, 14)

Sin is inextricably bound up with death since it is seen as the penalty for the Fall. In the words of St. Paul “The sting of death is sin” (1 Cor. 15, 56). Judas Machabeus was even more explicit about the relationship between sin and death when he instituted the funeral rite: “A holy and wholesome thought it is to pray for the dead, for their guilt’s undoing” (2 Machabees 12, 46).

In The Romance of the Rose, Jean de Meun lists man’s numerous evil propensities, which he sees as being unnatural, or against Natura. When man works actively against nature, he is a monster and a traitor who deserves death: “Does he not purchase death/” Who to such sins devotes himself (Johnson-ed, 1941, 497-498). To sin is to go against one’s nature and to turn one’s back on God who is the principle of life. It is logical therefore to conclude that in sinning, man is in effect, choosing death. This is the kernel of the teaching which Philosophy imparts to Boethius: “I think, you are bringing yor eyes to look with greater care upon the truth... there is nothing, therefore, which could preserve its own nature as well as go against God” (Johnson-ed, 1941, III,116). Although Boethius’ work deals explicitly with the problems which changes of fortune pose to men, it is in fact the author’s personal way of coming to terms with the meaning of life and especially with his own imminent death.
The religious dimension of Death and Sin, as may be expected, was often alluded to in Medieval plays: “Ye thin sin in the beginning ful sweet/Which in the end causeth the soul to weep./When the body lieth in clay” (Anonim, 1956, 13-15) and again: “Drowned in sin, they know me not for their God” (Anonim, 1956, 26). It is significant that the Christian tradition, which regards the Virgin Mary as having been conceived without sin could not logically bring itself to contemplate the eventuality of death, and its ensuing decay, in her case. It speaks of her “Dormition” (In the Eastern Church, the Feast of the Falling Asleep (dormitio) of the Virgin Mary, corresponding to the Assumption in the West, and is observed on 15th August.) to insure that the faithful realise her corporeal incorruptibility and she is also assumed into Heaven. It is after all poetic justice, as well as divine grace which are at the origin of the proviso that her sinless body should not be committed to the earth.

The anonymous poet of “A Last Will and Testament” cleverly dissociates himself from his sins by bequeathing them to the devil, hoping thereby to free himself from the incumbent penalty of eternal death:

Mine horrible sinnes that so sore me binde
With weight me oppresse, that lyen so manifold,
So many in numbre, so sondry in kinde.
The Fende, by his instaunce, to them made me bold
From him they come, to him I yolde wolde.
Wherefore the second part of my will it thus,
That the Fende receive all my sinnes as his
(Davies-ed, 1963, 176)

Man’s automatic reaction in the face of Death is to attempt to escape. The Romance of the Rose describes the recoiling effect which the sight of a corpse causes even inside the family circle:

Who, when they see father lying dead.
Themselves in face of Death betake to flight.
Though later they must die, howe’er they flee;
For medicine and vows are nothing worth.
(Johnson-ed, 1941, 23-26)

Others try to buy time but Death, although it is the principal agent of decay, is incorruptible. Everyman promises to give Death all his goods, and a thousand pounds in exchange for a reprieve and is told: “Everyman, it may not be, by no way./I set not by gold, silver, nor riches” (Anonim, 1956, 124-125).

In his Summa Contra Gentiles, the “Angelic Doctor” treated the subject of mortality and recognized this state of affairs: “Man naturally shuns death, and is sad about it: not only shunning it now when he feels its presence, but also when he thinks about it. But man, in this life, cannot obtain not to die” (Aquinas, 1949, 665).

It is particularly ironic that in this transient and unstable world apparently ruled by Blind Fortuna, the sinister figure of Death should be the only certainty of which man could be sure, although he never knows the tires of playing cat and mouse with its human victims:

Thus all who live attempt to flee from death.
From black faced Death, who follows in pursuit
They run a cruel race ere they are caught;
They flee, and Death gives chase.

(Johnson-ed, 1941, 43-46)

Popular imagination has portrayed Death riding an ox or even walking. Death has no need to hurry; slowly but surely it will eventually catch up with its quarry:

... ten, twenty years,
Thirty, forty, fifty, sixty five,
Yes, seventy, eighty, ninety, or fivescore.
And always crushing those whom he can seize.

(Johnson-ed, 1941, 46-49)

Once man has realised that he must accept death, his reaction is either to make the most of the present moment and to enjoy himself, or, if he is religiously minded, to use the time left to him to amend his life. For some ancients, death was a Dionysian inducement to enjoy life to the full:

In his De Rerum Natura, Lucretius, a follower of Epicurus, argued that it is as irrational to worry about the state of death as of pre-birth: non-existence is not an evil, and a person fragments at death and so cannot experience fear. For this reason Lucretius attacked the notion of the punishments of Hades and believed in the mortality of the vital animating spirit, since it leaked inconsequentially out of the body at death. There was thus no moral obligation to honour the dead, since they could make no claim upon the living.

(Binski, 1996, 22)

This Epicurean attitude however was already current in Babylonian times, for in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the hero meets in his travels Siduri, the “divine barmaid” who gives him the following advice:

Thou, O Gilgamesh, let thy belly be full;
Day and night be thou merry;
Make every day a day of rejoicing.
Cherish the little one holding thy hand,
And let the wife rejoice in thy besom.
This is the lot of mankind

(Anonim, 1973, 156)

It is a frank and unashamedly Bacchic invitation to enjoy life while there is time, for the moment is precious. Life is short and man is only assured of the Now. This Carpe Diem philosophy of existence is a Roman notion (Horace. Odes 1,2,8.) which Medieval man had no inclination for, but is was taken up later by the Romantics who saw the moment of happiness-however ephemeral as a port in the stormy sea of life (Katz, 1994, 32-51). Catullus, whose ardent passion for his mistress-whom he named by the poetic and immortal name of Lesbia-became the model of Romantic love he wrote: “Let us live and love, my Lesbia.../For once our brief day has set./There is a night which is one long endless sleeping” (Mallen, 1927, 23).

On the whole, the Medieval mentality was more inclined to see death as a warning, which is entirely along the doctrinal lines of Christianity. Death reminds man to prepare for the judgement when he is to account for his sins as William Dunbar in his “Lament for the Makaris” writes:

Sen for the deid remeid is none
Best is that we for dede dispone
Eftir our ded that lif may we.
Timor mortis conturbat me

(Dunbar, 1932, 69-72)

The “Memento Mori” is a reminder that life can be extinguished as easily as a candle. Human life is fragile and each time man comes face to face with death he remembers that some day, it will be his turn:
All ye that passe by this holy place,
Both spiritual and temporal of every degree,
Remember yourself well during time and space:
I was as ye are nowe, and as I ye shall be,
Wherefore I beseech you, of youre benigne,
For the love of Jess and his mother Mare,
For my soule to say a Pater Noster and an Ave.
(Davies-ed, 1963,95)

Within the structure of the dance of death/macabre tradition (a tradition in which people from every class of a society are compelled to dance with cadavers) in Medieval literature and art in which the representation of the personified Death concept is analysed to depict a didactic approach towards death, the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead is an illustration of the theme that, with every day that passes, man fades away and comes ever nearer to the grave. The three living meet themselves dead and, as they learn the lesson, they caution the reader that “Dede is to man the kinde way” (Johnson-ed, 1941, 191). The cautionary note is clear in Villon’s own epitaph in “The Ballade of the Hanged”:

Brothers, fellow-men, you who live on
after we are dead, do not harden
your hearts against us...
Let no one laugh at our sufferings,
But pray God to forgive us all.
If we call your brothers, you must not be offended
Although we died at the hands of the hangman;
After all, you know that all men are not endowed with good judgement...
Take care then, that you never join our company,
But pray God to forgive us all
(B.Woledge-ed,1961, 331)

A similar thought is expressed by Robert Southwell:

If none can escape death’s dreadful dart,
If rich and poor his beck obey,
If strong and wise, if all do smart,
Then, I to escape have no way.
Oh! Grant me the grace, O God, that I
My life may mend,tho I must die.
(Johnson-ed, 1941, 120-125)

Incidentally, the first horseman of the Apocalypse also deals death with a dart: “And I saw, and behold, a white horse: And he that sat on him had a bow... And he went forth conquering, and to conquer” (Revelation, 6,2).

For Johan Huizinga, the macabre symbolised a metaphor of change in an entire culture and in history, as in nature birth and death are equally balanced. Similarly, the “waning of the Middle Ages”, a terminology which Huizinga uses involved cultural extremes of violence, of eliteness, of love of life and fear of death (Huizinga, 1997, 198-219). On this subject Paul Binski relates dualistic approach to Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle, “which asserted that organisms have a dualistic instinctual drive both to death and to life, and that... death is the fundamental aim of life” (Binski, 1996, 130) and this approach clarifies the commentary of Huizinga on the idea of death in Medieval times:

Huizinga’s account provides a generalized cultural commentary on this split between the lust for life and for death, Eros and Thanatos. To Huizinga, the culture of the fifteenth century in the north was as valid as that of Renaissance Italy, but its validity and appeal was that of decadence, of introspection and ingrowth; this was the
true age of chivalry and of courtly love, of hierarchy and high formality, and of deadly conservatism. But it was also an age of fear, and the macabre was the product of a generalized sensibility. It was a great cultural idea. (Binski, 1996, 130)

At first sight, the dualistic approach of life and death appears to be seen in the dance of death because dance evokes sensual happiness, but the idea of death evokes unhappiness leading to fear, but the possibility of happiness in dancing is not regarded as a positive trait in Medieval times. In Handling Sin, the author disapproves of dancing because he claims that it is considered to be a sensual activity which causes erotic bliss and seduction (Johnson-ed, 1941, 121-127).

The Dance of Death tradition was not widespread in English studies in Medieval times as it was in France (Kurtz, 1934, 90-200). While Death can sometimes frighten by being “a menacing figure, the Dance of Death, in which he flings up his skeleton arms and legs in a mockery of happiness, is especially appalling in its gruesome gaiety” (Bolton, 1986, 299). In France and Italy, the Dance of Death is presented well in wall-paintings and inscriptions on them, but this is not a tradition in England: “The many wall-paintings of the Three Living and the Three Dead, in which time is broken down so that three young men meet their future skeletons, is often accompanied by short verses on scrolls that extend from their mouths like balloons in a modern strip cartoons” (Bolton, 1986, 229-300). John Lydgate refers to the dance of death in The Fall of Princes in the sense that everybody will die sooner or later for Death does not discriminate between a high or a low class person when a person has to perish. In this work, three kings are hunting their dead fathers to have an idea on their future selves and one of the fathers in the form of a skeleton summarizes that all the physical traits will be lost when one dies, and the persona clarifies that a dead person will be the mirror of a living person for the living person will also take part in the dance of death:

In this myrrowre everi wight mai fynde
That him behoveth to go upon this daunce
... Lokys on my bonus that blake bene and bare.
Fore wyle wondon in this word, at worchip we were,
Whe hadon oure wyfe at our will well fore to ware
Thenkes ye no ferle bot frayns at me ferys,
Thuh ye be never so fayre thus schul ye fare

Similarly, in the same work an aristocratic lady is summoned to the Dance of Death:

Come forth anoon, my lady and Princesse,
Ye moste also go up-on this daunce.
Nowt mai availe yowre grete straungenesse,
Nowther yowre beaute ne yowre grete pleasaunce,
Yowre riche a-rai ne yowre daliaunce
That somme-tyme cowde so many holde on honde
In lue: for al yowre dowble variaunce
Ye mote as now this foting undecestonde

“The only complete and surviving printed text of the Dance of Death (that of Tottel in 1554) at the end of The Fall of Princes contains only two illustrations” (Woolf, 1968, 351). In the first illustration, Dance of Death, the Pope, King and their skeletons, whose faces are still human-like and resemble the Pope and Emperor, are dancing. The faces of the skeletons are pale and they are about to decay. In the second illustration, the King is not alive anymore. He lies on a tomb and looks tired and
old. Pink worms have been eating of the body of the King. Three Living aristocrats look at the body of
the King with anxious faces.²

The link between the living and the dead is expressed with the idea that “What I was you are,
what I am you shall be” and in this sense the dead warns the living from their graves:

Wat so thu art that gost her be me
Witstand and behold and wel bethenke the
That swich as thu art i was wone to be
And swich as i am nou saltu sone be.

(Johnson-ed, 1941, 3-5)

As in Boethius’ Fortuna, death may give a true perspective to life. Indeed, one may be tempted
to say with him that there is nothing wrong with Death but with man’s attitude to it. It is part of the
human condition to die and although everybody may not understand it, the world’s government is
subject to divine reason and not to blind chance. Therein lies the ultimate hope of mankind for its true
home is not on earth which is a place of exile. To remain earth-bound is to condemn oneself to a living
death The Consolation of Philosophy:

Alas, close to the bounds of night
Orpheus turned his sight backwards.
And, looking, lost and killed her there.
For you I sing the unhappy affair.
Whoever seeks the upward way
To lift your mind into the day
For who gives in and turn his eye
Back to darkness from the sky,
Loses while he looks below
All that up with him may go.

(Johnson-ed, 1941, III, 49-58)

Just as Boethius came to the defense of Fortuna, poets and thinkers have been at pains to find the
positive side of death in order to allay their fear of it:

Some men seith that deth is a thef
And all unwarned wol on his stele,
And I say nay, and make a pref,
That deth is studefast, trewe, and lele,
And warneth uche man of his greef
That he will o day with him dele.

(Davies-ed, 1963, 43)

Did not Africanus point out that death, far from being a tyrant, was a liberator? : “Those are alive who
have sprung forth from the fetters of their bodies as from a prison;Indeed, what is called your life is
death” (Mallen, 1927, 201). Cicero’s concept of the after life is one where there is no change and
decay, a world of stability and in those terms, death is an attractive proposition. It can also be sought,
as a relief from pain, when life is particularly trying as in the case of Charles of Orleans whose young
wife died when he was held, a prisoner for twenty five years in England: “For dedy liif, my livy deth I
wite” (Davies-ed, 1963, 88).

Death confers a true perspective on the puny efforts of man. There is nothing like the thought
of his own mortality to bring man down to earth (as it were) and to reduce him to his rightful
dimension as he imagines Death itself laughing at his empty vanity:

Erthe toc of erthe erthe wyth woh,
Erthe other erthe to the erthe droh,
Erthe leyde erthe in erthene throh.
Tho hevede erthe of erthe erthe ynoh!
(Johnson-ed, 1941, 1-4)

The same idea is expressed in the following poem entitled “Last Will and Testament” by an anonymous poet:

First to the erthe I bequeth his parte:
My wretched carein is but foule claye.
Like than to like, erthe in erthe to laye:
Sith it is according, by it I woll abide.
As for the first parte of my will that erthe erth hide
(Davies-ed, 1963, 176)

From this, one can see that Medieval man’s notion of Death, far from being a Romantic one, was realistic and rather earthy. His religion was a source of hope to him since it promised him-provided he lived according to its tenets- a share in the divine life. Death could hold its sway on earth but its dominion would pass away because of Christ’s victory over it. The prophet Hosea in the Bible saw the Lord as the plague and destruction of Death: “will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction” (Hosea, 13, 14) and Isaiah comforted moral man with the promise of an eternity where suffering would no longer exist: “He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces” (Isaiah 25,8). Indeed, the roles are reversed. Man is no longer to fear, on the contrary, it is Death which will stand quaking before the throne of God. A thirteenth century sequence sung during the mass of interment says as much:

Lo, the Day of Wrath, that day,
Shall the world in ashes lay;
David thus and the sibly say.
Oh, how great shall be the fear,
That at last, as Judge severe,
Christ the Lord shall reappear
When the trumpet’s wondrous sound,
Ringing through each burial ground,
All shall call the Throne around.
Death and Nature then shall quake
As the dead from dust awake,
To their judge reply to make.
(Johnson-ed, 1941,70-82)

Therefore, there is no need to grieve. St. Paul says expressly: “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope” (Thessalonians 4, 13).

Accordingly, there are numerous examples in Medieval literature in which the ritualization of grief was attacked as a false view of death. In many elegies, such as in Pearl, the underlying message is one of rejoicing as the father of Pearl learns the idea of Heavenly Jerusalem and attains religious maturity after her death. The father realises that her daughter has matured into the lovely spouse of the Heavenly Bridegroom (Ege, 1994, 36-41) and God “corounde [her] quene in blysse to brede” (Anonim, 1970, 415) and she is clad in the white garments of the hundred and forty-four thousand virgin brides of Christ (Revelation, 14, 3,4).

The expectation of a moderately long life can never be taken for granted but it was infinitely less so for Medieval man. Apart from the plagues and famines which periodically struck the land, he
had also to contend with the vicissitudes of interminable wars. Mortality was exceptionally high in the Middle Ages, compared to present days. This is what H. Knighton, a historian who lived in the Middle Ages, says about the Black Death in his *Chronicon*: “For there is no memory of a mortality so severe and so savage from the time of Vortigen, King of the Britons, in whose time, as Bede says, the living did not suffice to bury the dead” (Johnson-ed, 1941, 219).

Illnesses which nowadays can be cured, or at least kept at bay, held sway over a helpless people. Remedies relied mainly on herbalism and the custom of blood letting by way of the application of leeches did not help matters. This debilitating manner of healing was so current that a surgeon was commonly called a leech. Arabic medicine, which was more advanced, had not yet established itself, in any case, was only available to the rich and noble portion of the population. The only hospital available for the poor in Paris was L’Hopital des Quatre-Vingt, which as its name conveys, had beds only for eighty patients and its resources were hopelessly inadequate anyway. The rest, took refuge with other vagabonds, beggars and thieves in the court of miracles which Victor Hugo was to describe so vividly in “Notre Dame de Paris”, and which gives the audience a poignant image of the sufferings which was the common lot of men in the Middle Ages (Martin, 2002, 80-101).

Gibbets too dotted the countryside, as Villon’s “Ballade des Pendus” tells the reader. Medieval man was surrounded by death and its ubiquity was a stark and horrifying reality, a far more concrete one that one could ever imagine, even in our days of so called violence:

You see us hanging here, five or six of us,
As to the flesh we fed so well,
It has long ago been devoured or rotted away,
And we, the bones, are turning to dust and ashes.
The rain has washed and scourged us
The sun has dried and blackened us.
Magpies and crows have pecked out our eyes
And plucked our beards and eyebrows.
We are never left at peace for a moment,
Driven endlessly this way and that
At the whim of every changing wind.
The birds have pecked at us until we are
More pitted than a thimble...

(B.W. Woledge-ed, 1961, 332)

This seemingly irreverent, half jocking way of describing the effects of death is no more than another way of getting to terms with it. Also, it serves to give an impression of the kind of world in which Medieval man lived. He was literally obsessed by the vision of death and by the expectation of the imminent end of the world. St. Hildegard, the 12th century visionary, had announced that the world would come to its end after the year 1180 and the belief was so strong that people were still expecting the second coming of Christ in 1250 (Brown, 1964, 90). This chronic anxiety lasted until the 16th century:

The terrors of the final reckoning were intensified by a general sense of its imminence. There had always been prophets who insisted that the world was nearing its end, but the feeling of impending doom grew particularly acute in the late 15th century... In 1499 a German astrologer confidently asserted that the world would be destroyed by a second deluge on 25 February 1524

(Gibson, 1961, 52)

The Christian could not accept the ancients’ concept of life as an endless state of flux. Neither could he admit that the soul returned anonymously to a general mass of divinity, as is the Islamic
belief. On the contrary, he insisted that this very transience carried man to God and that life was in effect a pilgrimage, a symbol of Everyman’s journey to his creator, and that everything that happened to him during his earthly peregrinations was providential and working to his ultimate good. In the Parson’s Prologue, Chaucer says:

> And Ihesu, for his grace, wit me sende
> To shewe yow the way, in this viage,
> Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage
> The highe Jerusalem celestial.

(Chaucer, 1992, 48-51)

It is significant that the last sacrament, given to the dying to help them on their journey beyond is called the Viaticum (the Eucharist administered to a dying person/provisions or money granted to an envoy about to make a journey). It also presupposes that God is in control. Even the Romans equated eternal life with the divinity and Lucretius, in his De Rerum Natura speaks of Nature and her ways as being guided by divine providence. Nature is the antithesis of Death since she is the mother of all living things. Her vocation is the re-generating of new species. Her power is such that she can even lull war, which is one of the chief allies of death, into peace with “sweet coaxing words: (Johnson-ed, 1941, I,6): “For the very nature of divinity must necessarily enjoy immortal life in the deepest peace” (Johnson-ed, 1941, I, 9-10):

The image of man as a pilgrim was familiar to Medieval artists, from the early Crusades to Erasmus’s days:

> What this meant to the late Middle Ages is comprehensibly diagrammed in a German wood-cut, the ‘Mirror of Understanding’ of circa 1488. Equipped with staff and knapsack, the Pilgrim advances in the central circle along a particularly thorny path of life, tugged at from behind by the devil and attacked from in front by Death. An angel directs his attention to the Ten Commandments above. The borders contain other matters pertaining to Salvation

(Gibson, 1961, 102)

While Death seeks to annihilate life from the earth, Natura keeps the balance by forging at a furious pace in her workshop to replace the loss:

> Dame Nature is so pitiful and good
> That when she sees Corruption league himself
> Withevious Death, and both together come
> To ruin the productions of her shop,
> She forges and she hammers tirelessly,
> Ever renewing individuals
> By generations new

(Johnson-ed, 1941, 78-84)

The same momentum and incessant activity is reflected in John Lydgate’s Resoun and Sensuallyte:

> "But to recusen hir (Atropos) damage /She (Natura) wirketh ay, and cesseth noghi’ (Johnson-ed, 1941, 380-381).

All the same, it is always with some amount of nostalgia that man reflects on the days gone by and of his own youth when he was carefree and healthy. Old age and decay prepare him for death and show him the vanity which resides behind the attraction of fame, beauty, strength and riches. In his "Lament for the Makaris”, Dunbar traces his own inner growth as he reflects on the transience of life:

> I that in heill wes, and gladnes,
> Am trublit now with greit seiknes,
> And feblit with infermite:
> Timor mortis conturbat me.
> Our plesaunce heir is all vaneglory;
> This fals warld is bot transitory
> The flesh is brukle, the fend is sle;
The 13th century poem “How Death Comes” describes with vivid accuracy the decaying process of old age as it passes in review every failing part of the body. For all the gravity and melancholy of the subject matter, one is aware of the vein of irony which resides in the stark realism of the poet’s tone of voice and is very much akin to the feeling of the “Ballad of the Hanged”:

Wanne mine eyhnem misten,
And mine heren sissen,
And my nose coldet,
And my tunge foldet,
And my rude slaket,
And my lypses blaken,
And my muth grenet,
And my spotel rennet,
And mine her riset,
And mine herte griset,
And mine honden bivien,
And mine fet stivien.
Al to late! Al to late
Wanne the bere is ate gate
(Davies-ed, 1963, 17)

The same attitude is in a lyric which is designated as “Dying Man” whose appearance indicates the signs of death when he grows pale and his physical activities deteriorate.

When the hede quakyth
And the lypses blakyth
And the nose not sharpyth
And the senow starkyth
And the brest pantyth
And the brethe wantyth
And the tethe ratelyth
And the throte roteth
And the sowle is wente owte
The body ne tyt but a clowte
Sone be it so stekevne
The sowle all clene ys forgetene
(Johnson-ed, 1941, 1-12)

The Medieval poet was certainly not a romantic when it came to death. He regarded it, as every one else did, for what it was: a force to be endured and respected. The consolation, of course, he found it in the Bible. Where else? The Book of Wisdom reminds the reader that after all, human beings are not departing with less than they originally had: “As he came forth of his mother’s womb, /Naked shall he return to go as he came” (Wisdom 5, 15).

With Isaiah, readers are introduced to the well-loved ubi sunt (“Where are they”) theme: “Thine heart shall meditate terror. Where is the scribe? Where is the receiver? Where is that counted the towers?” (Isaiah, 33, 18). Indeed, “Time sees the end of all things” (Mallen, 1927, 77), as Ovid puts it so aptly in Metamorphoses. Everyman comes to the conclusion that Death’s sole purpose is to teach men the lesson that nothing on earth is eternal and that there is nothing that Time would not eventually consume: “The summoning of Everyman called it is, /That our lives and ending shows /How transitory we be all day” (Anonim, 1956, 4-6). The next step of the conclusion which John Lydgate arrives at
It is only natural, that in his horror of death, man’s imagination should visualize it as some awful, mysterious being. In almost every culture death was personalized very early on. The Egyptians had Anubis and the Hindus, Shiva and his wife the goddess Kali or in other mythological terms Roman Ceres, (Keres) Greek Demeter, Hades, Roman Prosepine, Greek Pluton or Atropos. Man saw Death as either a demon or a god, but always as some threatening power which had to be placated. Popular imagination has always been prolific in imagery. Eight centuries before Chirst, Isaiah imagined man as artisan who, each day, weaved his own life under the supervision of Death, the Master Weaver: "Like a weaver I have rolled up my life; He cuts me off from the loom" (Mallen, 1927, 91).

The Greeks had a similar concept of Death and named it Atropos as Resoun and Sensuallyte indicates:

\[
\text{For Atropos, hir self to wreke,} \\
\text{Doth ful many thredes breke,} \\
\text{The wiche of malyce kan manace,} \\
\text{The protreytures to difface...} \\
\text{(Johnson-ed, 1941, 369-372)}
\]

Because Death often comes when it is least expected, men have come to compare its advent to the stealthy coming of a robber. Chaucer calls Death a thief in The Pardoner’s Tale: "Ther cam a privee theef, men clepeth Deeth /That in this contree al the peple sleeth" (Chaucer, 1992, 676-677).

St. Paul warns the Thessalonians not to let themselves be caught unaware: "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians, 5, 2). Death is in the habit of arriving unannounced. That is what Everyman learns to his cost: "Death: Lo, yonder I see Everyman walking /Full little, he thinketh on my coming/ Everyman: O Death, thou comest when I had thee least in mind/" (Anonim, 1956, 80-81, 110).

The 15th century poem, "Farewell, this World", confirms this tendency of death to come without warning: "Today I sat full ryall in a cheire. /Till sotell deth knoked at my gate /And onavised, he seid to me, “chek-mate"" (Davies-ed, 1963, 109).

Death is more commonly associated with its attributes. It is seen, in the Judeo-Christian tradition as an agent of God, the Angel of Death: "And when the Angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem to destory it, the Lord repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed the people. It is enough: stay now thine hand" (Brown, 1964, 87).

Another title for it was the Destroyer, which again, is indicative of its effect: “For the Lord will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth the blood upon the lintel, and on the two
side posts the Lord will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you” (Exodus. 12, 23).

Death was also portrayed as being blind and groping to reach its victims because it appeared to seize living beings arbitrarily, regardless of their condition, age or health. In his comprehensive review of French Medieval art, Emile Male shows a photograph of a carving in Notre Dame of Paris, portraying Death as the horseman of Revelation. It is a magnificent and terrifying figure of Death, blind folded and riding a horse with a dangling corpse on the crupper (Male, 1965, 402).

Thanatos riding on one of the four horses of the Apocalypse was a familiar Medieval representation of Death: “And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth” (Revelation 6, 8).

The sword was equated with war, under the guise of Mars and even Saturn at times, as for example in the case of Arcite, who although victorious, eventually dies at the result of a fatal fall which occurred during the hour over which Saturn ruled in The Knight’s Tale:

Out of the ground a furie infernal sterte,  
Form Pluto sent at request of Saturne,  
For which his hors for fere gan to turne,  
And leep aside, and founderd as he leep  
(Chaucer, 1992, 2684-2687)

William Dunbar aptly points out that Death is the only and real Victor in any war in his “Lament for the Makaris”:

He takis the Knightis into field,  
Anarmit under helme and sheild  
Victour he is at all melle...  
He takis the campion in the stour,  
The capitane closit in the tour  
(Dunbar, 1932, 21-24, 29-30)

The power of the sword as a symbol of war is startlingly personified in the second apocalyptic horseman: “And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword” (Revelation 6, 4).

Incidentally, Bruegel, who was greatly influenced by the great artist Bosh, painted the "Triumph of Death" in which he makes use of the Johannine vision of the Last Day: “Led by a giant figure of Death on a red horse, an army of rotting corpses and skeletons herds its victims into a huge van-like box at the right; it is flanked by other skeletons drawn up in orderly ranks behind their coffin-lid shields” (Gibson, 1961, 109).

This fearsome picture, however, is effectively neutralised by Ezechiel’s no less terrible but hopeful vision of the Dry Bones:

... the valley was full of bones ...And He Said to me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O, Lord, thou knowest. Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord unto these bones; Behold I Will cause breath to enter into you and you shall live: And I will lay sinews upon you, and I will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord. So, I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I
prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone... the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above... and the breath came unto them, and they lived and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army
(Ezekiel 37, 1-10)

Hunger, mentioned in verse 8 of Revelation tallies with famines, and famines in Medieval times were as frequent as Biblical ones. Pharaoh’s dream of the seven lean cows swallowing up the seven fat ones is a proverbial one: “And when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread” (Genesis 41, 55).

Medieval famines were more often than not the result of war or pestilence. In his diary for February the second 1381, a Parisian merchant wrote this entry concerning the conditions of life in the French capital during the hundred Years War:

... for they ate what the pigs scorned to eat, they ate the cores of cabbages without bread or without cooking, grasses of the fields without head or salt... Also, in this time the wolves were so ravenous that they unearthed with their claws the bodies of people buried in the villages and fields; for everywhere one went, one found people dead in the field and towns, from the great poverty, the dear times, and the famine which they suffered, through the cursed war which always grew worse from day to day
(Johnson-ed, 1941, 225)

But above all, the plague was mankind’s worse enemy because unlike famine and war, it respected no frontier and from time immemorial, pestilences would sweep across continents and cut down men with the same swiftness and effectiveness as a scythe would mowe grass. In the Bilde, it is read: “So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning even to the time appointed: and there died of the people from Dan to Beersheba seventy thousand men” (2 Samuel, 24, 15). It is not surprising that the tone of the above, especially in the reckoning of the dead is found again in Henry Knighton’s description of the ravages of the Black Death in his Chronicon:

In this year (1348) and in the following one there was a general mortality of men throughout the whole world. It first began in India, then in Tharsis, then it came to the Saracens, and finally to the Christians and Jews, so that in the space of one year, from Easter to Easter, as the rumour spread in the Roman curia, there had died, as if by sudden death, in those remote regions eight thousand legions, besides the Christians.
(Johnson-ed, 1941, 216)

Apart from War, famine and the plague, the lot of the poor in Medieval times was a harsh one. It is in this context that one can understand the pleasure it afforded the poor to see that the rich and the great were their equal when it came to facing Death. The consolation may have been slight, but here is no doubt that the figure of Death, the leveller, was a favourite one judging by the amount of references on the subject. Dunbar says the following in his Lament for the Makaris:

Onto the deid gois all estatis,
Princis, prelatis, and potestatis,
Baith riche and pur of all degree...
He sparis no lord for his piscence,
Na clerk for his intelligence.
(Dunbar, 1932, 17-20, 33-34)

Even in as dry a subject as the account of the impact of the Black Death in England between 1348 and 1350, H. Knighton could not resist, in the middle of a list of horrendous statistics, to mention the fate of one particular ecclesiastic: Master Thomas Bradwardine was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury by the Pope, and when he returned to England, came to London. In less than two days he was dead (Johnson-ed, 1941-220).
When Orpheus went down to Hades in Robert Henryson’s *Complaint of Orpheus*, he found in the company of the ancient heroes, Hector, Priam and Alexander, some important clergymen, cardinals, bishops, and abbots who were once famous when they were alive:

Thair saw he mony paip and cardynall,
In haly kirk quhilk did abusioun,
And bishopis in thair pontificall,
Be symonie and wrang intrusioun;
Abbottis and all men of religioun
For evill disponyng of thair place and rent,
In flame of fyre wer bitirly torment.

(Johnson-ed, 1941, 47-53)

The Last Judgement and particularly Hell loomed large in Medieval man’s imagination. Terrifying accounts of the torments of Hell loomed large in Medieval man’s imagination. Terrifying accounts of the torments of Hell were the staple diet of the preacher’s repertory. Indeed, the stress on the corporeal ordeals of Hell were so intense that, as one Medieval sermon expressed it, “the pains of this life will seem but a soothing ointment in comparison” (Gibson, 1961, 55).

Miracle plays frequently ended with a vision of the Mouth of Hell showing the tribulations of the damned. Although the primary aim of these were meant as an invitation to the hearers and spectators to amend their lives, there is a strong suspicion that they provided no small amount of pleasure if one is to judge by the popularity of horrific paintings such as those of Bosch and the woodcuts of Durer. Bosch’s vision of the agony of Hell was mainly a physical one and it appealed to the concrete imagination of his contemporaries:

... the pale, naked bodies of the damned are mutilated, gnawed by serpents, consumed in fiery furnaces and imprisoned in diabolic engines of torture. The variety of torments seems infinite. In the central panel, one man is slowly roasted on a pit, basted by an ugly little creature with a bloated belly; nearby, a female demon has sliced up her victim into a frying pan, like a piece of ham, to accompany the eggs at her feet.

(Gibson, 1961, 55-56)

Hell, therefore, had to be avoided at all cost. During his life, and at every turn, the Christian was thus cautioned into rejecting sin and embracing a life of austerity, accepting meekly and even lovingly the trials and injustices which came his way: “Dreye here, man, thenne, if thou wilt/A luitel pine that me thee bit, /Withdraw thine eyses ofte” (Davies-ed, 1963, 25-27). The complication resided in the fact that all was not ended once the body was committed to the ground. Far from regarding death as an eternal and peaceful sleep of oblivion, the Christian knew that he had to face the Day of Reckoning, just as Everyman, to whom Death announces: “On thee thou must take a long journey; /Therefore thy book of count with thee thou bring” (Anonim, 1956, 210).

Life may be short but the soul, which is immortal can be penalised-out of all proportion-and for all eternity, at the result of the misdeeds committed by the body during its brief span of life. Poets have often imagined the coaxings, admonitions and teachings addressed by the soul to its wayward and disobedient mortal envelope which is invariably deaf to its advices. In the following poem “When Death Comes”, it is too late and as the corpse is ready to be interred, the soul reproaches it for being the cause of their downfall:

Me gravit him put other ston;
Therein me leit the fakul bon.
Thenne sait the soule to the licam,
Wey! That ic ever in thee com.
Thu moldes, Friday, festen to non,
The Christian’s belief in the dual nature of man reflects its debt to traditional Hebrew anthropology, which regarded the individual person as a psycho-physical organism. Death was seen as the fatal shattering of this organism but unlike the Christian conviction of a retention of personality after death, what survived for the Hebrews, was in no sense a real person but a shadowy entity which departed to a grim existence in Sheol. The Christian on the other hand, knows that his entire "persona", body and soul will eventually share the same fate. Emmanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish theosopher and visionary saw death as the freeing of the spiritual body from the "rotten rag of mortality" (Brown, 1964, 112). Blake, who was a pre-romantic writer and a visionary, was influenced by Plato’s symbol of the cave. He adapted it to suit his own vision of the body as a cave, lit by the five windows of the senses: “If the door of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thró narrow chinks of his cavern” (Raine, 1979, 113).

The weighing of man’s deeds was, according to the book of Revelation, the task of the third horseman: "And I behold, and lo a black horse; /and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand (Revelation, 6: 5).

If the weighing went against him, he was condemned to a dark yet fiery dungeon where he was unspeakably tortured and from which only the mercy of the Redeemer could save him, as is shown by the offertory of the Mass of Interment: “O Lord Jesus Christ, King of Glory, deliver the soul of all the faithful departed from the pains of Hell and from the deep pit: deliver them from the jaws of the lion, lest they fall into darkness, and the back gulf swallow them up” (Brown, 1964, 91).

Something of this terrible vision was imaginatively expressed by countless Medieval poets, painters and carvers and culminated in the fantastic illustrations of Hieronymus Bosch whose, genius was often copied but remained unsurpassed in its sheer power. One of the most popular and awesome vision was that of a mouth. The Jaws of Hell were in fact the mouth of Leviathan of which the book of Job speaks. God asks him: “Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook? Or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down? Cast thou put a hook into his nose? Or bore his jaw through with a thorn? Who can open the doors of his face? His teeth are terrible round about. ... Out of his mouth, go burning lamps, and sparks of fire leap out” (Job 41, 1, 2, 14, 19).

Saint Gregory the Great, among others, equated Satan with Leviathan and Honorius of Autun wrote:”Leviathan, the monster, which swims in the sea of the world is Satan. God has cast the hook in that sea. The cord is the line and it is the human generation of Christ. The metal of the hook is the divinity of Christ, the bait is his humanity. Attracted by the smell of flesh, Leviathan wants to seize it but the hook tears its mouth” (Mallen, 1972, 423-425).

It is interesting to note that Plato described the entry of Heaven as being a mouth through which the elect were allowed to pass but which transfixed them with terror all the same:
For this was one of the terrible things we saw. We were near the mouth of the chasm and about to go up through it after all our sufferings when we suddenly saw him and others, most of them tyrants... whom the mouth would not receive ... for whenever anyone incurably wicked like this, or anyone who had not paid the full penalty, tried to pass, it bellowed

(Plato, 1955, 449)

In the Medieval mind, however, there was a thin line dividing the concept of death and that of Hell, for death itself was seen as a wide open mouth as it is seen in *The Romance of the Rose*:

So Death, who never can be satisfied,  
Swallows each individual glutonously.  
His chase continues over land and sea  
Till in the end he has engulfed them all

(Johnson-ed, 1941, 59-62)

But the clenched teeth of Death and of Hell were forced open and proved powerless when, with Christ’s appearance, Love took root in deepest Hell. In his vision of the Harrowing of Hell, Piers the Ploughman witnesses the descent of the Saviour in the dark regions to claim the souls which he ransomed. Lucifer recognises his impotence: “I know this Lord and this light – I met him long ago. Death cannot hurt him, nor any of your Devil’s tricks” (Langland, 1966, 225). Earlier on, Satan had said as much: “He will seize mankind and carry them off where he likes, and it won’t take him long to bind me in chains” (Langland, 1987, 224).

Heaven is the ultimate goal of human desire when morality attaches great importance to a person. In Juliana of Norwich’s *Revelation of Divine Love*, good death and Heaven are awarded to those who believed in Christ: “*Chese I Ihu for my heven Whom/ I saw only in Payne at that tyme / I lykede no nothere hevene than Ihu*” (Johnson-ed, 1941, 17-19). In Walter Hilton’s *Of Angel’s Song*, heavenly music and Heaven (Johnson-ed, 1941, 31-32) are offered to those who deserve a good death.4

In conclusion death, finally, is the gate of authentic life for, in the words of William Blake, “... thó on Earth things seem Permanent, they are less permanent than Shadow, as we all know too well...” (Raine, 1979, 112) and not withstanding the social status, everybody will die.

NOTES

1 The references to anthologies will be given according to their editors for there are many literary works inside them.

2 I got this information in 1992 collection of the Warburg Institute when I was researching for my Ph. D. thesis in England.


REFERENCES


Warburg Institute Facsimile Lydgate Illustrations, 1992 Collection.