

Death the Leveller

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Activity I :

1. Why does the poet think that the glory of our blood and state are shadows?

Ans. Life on earth itself is a bubble. Our heritage and family honour give us status and importance in society. Our education, wealth and position determine who we are in society. But, as James Shirley says, these high positions by birth and otherwise are short lived. They are only for an instant. Death comes unexpectedly, and we cannot hide from it. Only the good actions we do on earth live on. Shadows too are only alive in the presence of light. Our blood and state too are shadows. Goodness is what makes us get heaven.

2. What do 'sceptre and crown' and 'scythe and spade' stand for and what do they symbolise?

Ans. The sceptre and crown are symbols of power of a king. The sceptre and crown are both ornamental and signs of personality. Thus, it is an armour to the king. The scythe and spade are not ornamental, they are the tools of

a farmer or the common man. It is also armour to him.

Both these symbolise the rank of a person on the ladder of social rank.

3. Why does the poet say that "there is no armour against fate"?

Ans. Wealth, power and ~~st~~ social status are short lived, they are not permanent. A man's life is determined by 'Fate'. We cannot hide ourselves from it. We have to move according to the spinwheel of time and fate. No armour will protect us from it. But the goodness that we do when we are alive will live on in the hearts of people even when we are gone. Man is mortal, born of the dust and to this dust we must go.

4. Some men with swords may reap the field. What does this mean?

'To reap the fields' is associated with farming and sowing. It means sowing in a large scale.

When the word 'sword' is used it represents the warfield or battlefield. To reap the fields here refers to reaping the battlefield. And thus we understand very clearly that it means to kill thousands in battle.

Men with swords are soldiers and kings and they kill millions in fights and war.

5. What is the fate of the men with swords who hope to reap the field?

Ans. These brave men who won laurels on the battle field cannot prevent FATE and DEATH from attacking them. They must stoop their head to death just like any other common man. Their strength and bravery will not save them. Death is inevitable.

6. What does 'Death's purple altar' refer to?

Ans. An altar is a death bed where a dead body is kept before sacrifice or burial. A dead body has lost its colour and will be blue black without the flow of blood. This purple colour of death is transferred to the altar. So the figure of speech applied here is 'transferred epithet'.

7. What does the phrase 'victor-victim' mean?

Ans. Victor - means the person who wins and victim means the person who is killed by the victor. Be it the victor or victim, death is common to anyone and both of them bleed on the altar of death.

8. What can survive death? What are the things that blossom in the dust why?

Ans. Death is impartial and unexpected. It takes away man from earth. But the goodness in him, the just actions, the love and care he showered on family and friends will live on. Only these things will leave memories on the sands of time. Those memories will blossom in the dust.

9. Why is Death called the Leveller?

To level means to make straight or equal. In this poem, death is personified as a Leveller.

Life on earth is not equal for all men. Some are born rich and great, some are powerful, some live in luxury, and on the other hand, some live in poverty, some work hard for a living, some suffer diseases. But death is not partial. He attacks each man with the same spirit. He leaves no one alone. He is a leveller, who makes the rich and the poor equal on earth. So he is undoubtedly a 'LEVELLER'.

Activity II

Elaborate these ideas.

(1) Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet and blossom in the dust.

Death wipes off life from earth.

He pays no attention to the fact that each man had his own status and position in society, or that the person

he is about to attack was a king or a labourer. And 'man' is thus forced to leave earth.

The only things that remain, are the goodness and just actions we have ~~done~~ done when we were alive.

If we shower love and affection on our family and friends, we will remain fresh in their memory, even after we are gone. If we have served the society, our name will be remembered. And our children will survive us, our good name and legacy will live on.

Even though death smells bad, these memories will bring sweet scent and these memories will blossom, never to be forgotten.

(2) The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things,
There is no armour against Fate.

Ans. Life on earth is like a tear drop, it hangs down and after a while falls and loses content and shape. The status and riches by birth and family are not permanent, the education we get and the position of our job too are not everlasting. They are shadows which have existence only in the presence of light. We have use of wealth and status only when our

body exists on earth. We have to face FATE and death boldly, as we have no way to hide. There is no armour to protect us from death. However the goodness we did, the just actions we performed and the service we did to mankind will make memories live on and on. Only these will be permanent on earth.

'Let us leave footprints on the sands of time.'

Appreciation of the Poem - Death the Leveller

"Only a moment do we have on earth. Try and fill it with things worth lived" said a great philosopher once. Life is a bubble, ready to burst any minute. The glories of blood and state are shadows said James Shirley in this famous poem 'Death the Leveller'. and surely we do get the meaning on appreciating the poem. Written to make the upper class ~~and~~ educated people aware of the momentary value of position in society. James Shirley praises 'Death' for his impartial nature to man on earth. God creates man very different and unique from each other, but Death levels this inequality. The poem is short but precise and has a depth of meaning in each line.

The thoughts in it are crystal clear, without any touch of impurity in it. The harsh realities of life like death and fate are portrayed with clarity too. The poem is a warning and reminder to us that we must not be proud of social status and riches. The opening lines "The glories of our blood and state are shadows" is highly thought provoking. Man is proud of earthly achievements that he thinks riches and gold are permanent. But he must be aware that we have no armour against FATE. Death is now personified as a cruel dictator who snatches away the gift of life without our permission. The sceptre and crown are equalled with the scythe and spade, justifying that the symbols of power and monarchy and the tools of hard labour are equal when man goes into his grave. Soldiers and farmers both reap their own fields, but their strong nerves must give up when DEATH, the common enemy to all men, comes unexpectedly. Finally, the garlands that are worn by the victorious, will wither away when we rest upon Death's purple altar, dead, without blood flow. We must stoop to FATE. Our head must come to the cold tomb.

The poem may seem frightening, because the pleasures of life seem precious to each one of us. We fear fate and death. The poem may seem negative too. But James Shirley adds a positive note. A ray of hope flickers! a solution for life after death; a way to make memories live on — that is to be GOOD and JUST and LOVING while living on earth.

Twenty four lines compiled into three stanzas, has an ocean of meaning embedded in it. It is more or less a ballad type of poem with the rhyme scheme ABA1B CCDD.

The poem abounds in imagery associated with war and death and farming. There are many couplets — two lines of poetry that rhyme with each other and are of the same length.

eg: Sceptre and crown
Must tumble down.

Personifications are many:

eg) ① Death lays his icy hand on kings
② Cold tomb ...

Transferred Epithets are also many

- 1) Then boast no more your mighty deeds
- 2) Death's purple altar
- 3) Actions of the just smell sweet

Thus, this funeral song, has done justice to its theme.

The title "Death the Leveller" too is full of meaning, which is made very clear throughout the poem. Death is an impartial personality, but the only problem is that he comes uninvited and snatches away the gift of LIFE. However the poet gives us a positive thought to ponder in the last two lines — the goodness that we do on earth live on even after we have gone.