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# The Intricacy of Death and Destiny

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### The Intricacy of Death and Destiny

It is our eternal shadow and our ultimate judge. It is our shared destiny and greatest fear; death. The conceptualization of death has always been a fascination of man; we have forever explored it, pondered it, dissected it, but never conquered it. We know how to live, but yet very few of us know how to die. It would seem that our fear of death has shaped the very foundation of the human condition; it is perhaps life's greatest tool, as it proposes an ultimatum to the significance of our existence. The objectification of death has given birth to some of the most important pieces of art and literature in the history of mankind such as Caravaggio's *David and Goliath*, and Picasso's *Guernica*. As the topical avoidance of death is impossible, we have sought to sprint towards it in a sense, perhaps as a way to harness its vast mystery, but probably because it is, in a way, necessary. In order to produce a work that justifies and parallels the human experience, death is an essential piece of the puzzle.

Two of the most brilliant explorations of this dynamic are vastly different yet inherently important works. The genius of both George Orwell's political satire *1984*, and Albert Camus' *The Plague* is their accessibility to the imagination regarding dying, the authors ability to paint such a bleak picture of destitution and the finality of life is an invitation to the reader to contemplate our own brief stint on this earth and in turn measure the very fiber of our societal discourse.

When considering the primary thematic elements of *1984*, death is not the first motif that springs to mind. Rather, the loss of freedom, censorship and maniacal nationalism seem to be at the forefront of the novel's satirical focus. However it is Orwell's perfectly scripted subtly that defines his art. He manages to peel back the layers of our fear of death and in turn paint it in an entirely new light. By creating the idea of being "vaporized" he manages to simultaneously speak to the notion of losing the physicality of life while also being robbed of our identity and significance, which is ultimately the driving force behind the human derivative.

*1984* presents a world where the governing bodies' entire purpose is to eliminate the idea of individual identity which ties directly back into what inspires our fear of death: the chance that our life meant nothing to a world that will churn on either way. "If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say this or that even, it never happened - that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture and death (41)." Describing the citizens that were caught by the Thought Police in darkest hours of night and their existence scoured from reality Orwell wrote "People simply disappeared, always during the night. Your name was removed from the registers, every record of everything you had ever done was wiped out, your one-time existence was denied and then forgotten. You were abolished, annihilated: vaporized was the usual word." (Orwell 19)

Orwell recognizes that this phobia of dying doesn't stem from the idea of "not living" but from having "never lived." This presents the reader with a world that is at once speculative and tangible. While the actuality of the setting is fictionalized, the basis of its message is rooted in reality. Winston's thought process and rationalization of fears is universal enough to be applicable to our own psyche while distinct enough to keep

him well within the realm of being a “character.” Thus, Orwell has molded a protagonist that is shockingly intricate yet strangely relatable. Time and time again Winston seems to be desperate to salvage what is left of his individuality, although he is aware that desperation could eventually lead to his non-existence.

"They could not alter your feelings; for that matter you could not alter them yourself, even if you wanted to. They could lay bare in the utmost detail everything you had done or said or thought; but the inner heart, whose workings were mysterious even to yourself, remained impregnable."

(Orwell 167)

In order to fully comprehend Orwell’s depiction of the interaction between death and man it becomes imperative to dissect it on a philosophical level. We must ask the question; is it our inherent right as human beings to believe that on some level our existence can be significant, and does that significance hinge on individualism? Quite simply, yes, although the spectrum of significance varies depending on circumstance and opportunity- it is indisputable that a feeling of self importance contributes to the essence of human dignity. The conflicting nature of this “scale of significance” is demonstrated in the contrast between Winston and Julia. While Winston’s notion of individuality and social contract revolves around bigger picture ideologies such as joining the revolutionary group known as the “Brotherhood” and regaining the ability to stay in control of his own memory, alternatively, Julia represents the frivolities of individuality. She regularly engages in sexual activity, a practice that is strictly forbidden by the party and the Anti-Sex League. In this small way she actually uses sex to rebel

against the party although in the end the government is able to control the individuals, stripping them of their uniqueness and quelling their rebellion.

"History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right. I know, of course, that the past is falsified, but it would never be possible for me to prove it, even when I did the falsification myself."

(Orwell 155)

In *The Plague*, Albert Camus, examines death through an existentialist lens. Thereby proposing a vastly different perspective than Orwell does in *1984*. *The Plague* is a chronological narrative of the evolution of disease in a specific area. The fear then stems from the physicality of death, as the novel pivots around a handful of main characters and their reaction to their village being swept away in a tidal wave of sickness and death. The entire concept however is approached as not a horrifying mystery, but as a given consequence of having lived. Camus contends, through his depictions of mass death, the irrationality of thanatophobia, as it is simply part of the human process. Famed existentialist Friedrich Nietzsche once said; "Let us beware of saying that death is the opposite of life. The living being is only a species of the dead, and a very rare species." This reflects many of the sentiments that shine through in Camus's work, that to view death as the "unknown" is a sheer human irresponsibility when we view death in its entirety, and its commonality.

By demonstrating the sheer depravity that the plague inflicted upon its people Camus is able to portray death as an outlet, a final sigh of relief in the heaving struggle between man and inevitability.

“I know positively - yes Rieux I can say I know the world inside out as no one on earth is free from it. And I know too that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him. What's natural is the microbe. All the rest- health integrity purity if you like - is a product of the human will of vigilance that must never falter. The good man the man who infects hardly anyone is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. And it needs tremendous will-power a never ending tension of the mind to avoid such lapses. Yes Rieux it's a wearying business being plague-stricken. But it's still more wearying to refuse to be it. That's why everybody in the world today looks so tired everyone is more or less sick of plague. But that is also why some of us who want to get the plague out of their systems feel such desperate weariness a weariness from which nothing remains to set us free except death.” (Camus 131)

This excerpt proposes a rarely thought about paradox that is a prevalent issue within the human experience. The suffering and anxiety and pain that the people of Oran experienced throughout the year that sickness set in was not worth its weight in human life. That is to say, that by the end of the ordeal, many of the villagers sought death as a means of escape, because the quality of the life they were experiencing was

not one worth living. The disease annihilated all traces of their past and drove its victims to unimaginable extremes of suffering and madness that only death could calm.

In the indulgence of fiction, we have always found a certain measure of solace. It provides an alternate, if sometimes flirting with reality, to our daily lives. But what is so stunningly original about both *The Plague* and *1984* is that they exist in the realm of fiction while also leaping across the borders of fantasy, fitting almost perfectly post modernism, becoming at once horrifying and alarming. It is the ability of both authors to so intricately pick apart the details of societal evolution and in turn create an account of the human condition under the guise of fiction. To simply categorize both works as “important” is undermining the enormity of their implications.

Throughout the human discourse we have systematically searched for answers to the most instinctual of life’s questions, but the inherent truth remains that our existence, our history, our future is all build upon the foundations of significance. Although our attempts to answer many of life’s bigger questions is like stumbling around in the pitch black trying to read a manuscript verbatim, it is the chase that is necessary. Perhaps then, our significance intertwines with our constant seeking of answers. Albert Camus himself once said “I rebel, therefore I am.” This is, of course, a twist to the famed Rene Descartes “I think, therefore I am” premise. But the underlying principles remain the same, which is that our very existence lies in the individuality of our intuition.

While Camus’s declaration is more of a challenge to think outside of the orthodox, he encourages the inference that we cannot be without not being. That is to say, death is the only thing that makes us “alive,” yet we are never truly “alive” until we

are allowed the freedom of significance. What is certain however, is that death is the most crucial part of life, for it makes the light of our existence shine so brightly that all that remains is us and the darkness. It's like standing high on a cliff knowing eventually you must plunge both beautiful and terrifying. A painfully delicate, tragically brief, magnificence is life. The ultimate paradox indeed.

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