

Death, What Gives Life Life in Ascent to Omai

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ABSTRACT

Wilson Harris's exposure to both indigenous and Western culture provided him with a well-rounded understanding of the importance of death. In *Ascent to Omai*, the contrasting concepts in the book are so fluid and ambiguous that the author manages to cross the line into a gray area. The paper also examines the culture context especially the Mexican folk culture that influenced his narratives and formed his philosophy of life and death.

Keywords: *Wilson Harris, Ascent to Omai, the theme of life and death in literary works, Mexican folk culture, Caribbean literature*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one of the most common definitions of death is "the end of life" (OED online). That is usually the understanding of death and the relationship between life and death in mainstream Western ideology. However, in different cultures "life on earth is often referred to as a dream" (Kelly 517), and in Wilson Harris's work, death has a connotation that is beyond its denotative Western meaning. In *Ascent to Omai*, Victor goes on a journey in the realm of dream and reality to find his father Adam and himself. Events related to death occur throughout, shifting Victor's direction and changing Victor's life. It is important to note that death, as it is portrayed in the novel, does not mark the opposite of life or an end to life or communion, but rather the start of a new self, a new understanding, what sparks meaning for life, or even life itself.

2. LIFE VS DEATH

In Wilson Harris's work, there is no clear line between life and death. Instead, the contrasting concepts are usually fluid and ambiguous. For example, in *Ascent to Omai*, paradoxes occur when no clear lines are drawn such as bodiless and bodily, judge and judged, master and pupil, and saviour and devil (Harris, "Ascent" 27, 52). This blurriness creates ambiguity between what are denotative opposites. As paradoxical as they might seem they can co-exist together: the relationship between them is fluid. Life and death are also portrayed in a similar way when one can be "[dead] today and alive tomorrow" (Harris, "Ascent" 27). This idea of unfixed contrast is shown across other works of Wilson Harris such as *Carnival*. "Carnival" cosmology has 'no absolute Inferno, absolute Purgatorio, absolute Paradiso' (Bennett): there are no absolute and defined separation of opposing ideas such as "Inferno" and "Paradiso", and the strict line between the two is blurry. As a pair of paradox, life and death functions similarly; one

concept does not necessarily mark the opposite of the other, and death does not necessarily mark the opposite or the end of life.

When there is no fixed separation of two seemingly opposing ideas, it is possible to cross between the two ideas. Similarly, one can cross between the paradoxical worlds of life and death. Towards the end of Victor's journey in *Ascent to Omai*, Victor was "in a true position to feel the rough edges upon the smooth lie of death" (Harris, "Ascent" 129); he was able to move beyond the barrier of death as well as the barrier between life and death. Victor is frequently facing death, but he keeps travelling back from death and then to death again: "[perhaps] in truth he died then (one serial configuration or possibility in him) as he had died before at birth (another serial flash when his mother fell to little Caesar), as he was to die again and again" (Harris "Ascent" 99). Instead of staying in one or the other, Victor is able to revisit both worlds--life and death--through instances such as the near-death experiences when he travels back from the edge of death to life. Spiritually, Victor is also able to recreate a life of a Child--Child One, Child Two, and Child Three--after the death of one (Harris, "Ascent"). Opposite ideas should not be crossable, yet in Wilson Harris's portrayal, Victor is able to cross between life and death, making life and death not opposite to each other.

While the paradoxical ideas are fluid, it can also be further interpreted that there is a gray area, a limbo (Adams). For Wilson Harris, limbo "reflects a certain kind of gateway or threshold to a new world and the dislocation of a chain of miles" (Harris, "History" 6) -- between the new world and the old world. In *Ascent to Omai*, Limbo is portrayed as in between life and death as well as reality and dreams. "The voluminous hill or coat to which he clung, sanctification of motherhood, intercession of motherhood, turned to limbo in his side" (Harris, "Ascent" 40): motherhood is something that Victor does not experience due to his mother's death. But through the gateway, the petticoat, Victor, who is in the world of life, is able to reach the new world of death, and connect with his mother. "[Limbo] aircraft" is another example of in-between reality and dreams, when the aircraft does exist and the trial that

Victor imagined does actually happen but the process of the trial is imaginary (Harris, "Ascent" 58). Similarly, "limbo mother", "limbo father", "limbo judge" are no longer in the world of reality; yet they still play an important role in the world of memories and dreams (Harris, "Ascent" 99). In the world of life, Victor connects with them who are in the world of death through the gateway--his memories and dreams. These portrayals explain how limbo represents an in-between state. The idea of this kind of state is also present in other ideologies such as "borderline reality" and "frontier" (Harris, "Ascent" 82). These ideas illustrate how there is a borderline area, a "limbo" between two seemingly opposite states of mind, which includes life and death. According to Mitchell, Wilson Harris also noted that Guyana is "the frontier between two zones of reality", which are "the dream of death and the dream of creation" (Mitchell). Through the lens of Guyana, a perspective that is important to Wilson Harris, it can be confirmed that there exists a "frontier", a limbo between death and creation in the fictional world that he portrayed. The paradoxical relationship of life and death is similar to those of reality and dreams as well as death and creation; there is also a limbo, a frontier reality between life and death. This limbo illustrates how life and death are blended together instead of conflicting with and opposing one another.

3. DEATH IN MEXICAN FOLK CULTURE

Under the influence of seemingly opposite worlds, Victor attempts to achieve a unity of the two ideas through travelling between reality, dreams and memories. In *Ascent to Omai*, Victor "[discerns] ... a frail multiform conception of unity, terrestrial and transcendental" (Harris, "Ascent" 31). He was sometimes in reality as he climbs up the hill and sometimes in dreams and memories as he reimagines the trial scenes; and through unity Victor is able to reach the "ultimate sacrifice", the "ultimate sentence", and the "ultimate forgiveness" (Harris, "Ascent" 131). As paradoxical ideas, life and death also contain unity in Mexican folk culture such as the Aztecs, a culture that has a significant effect on Wilson Harris. In *The Fabric of the Imagination*, Wilson Harris discussed Aztec culture and how they "were our blood brothers in their kinship to the identity of the sun" (Harris, "The Fabric" 181). In Mexican folk culture, "many artistic works" such as a clay mask in the Preclassic Period portrays "a symbol of the unity resulting from the complementary character of life and death" (Kelly 520). Unity and duality between other opposing ideas are also present in nature and cultures, especially the Aztecs (Kelly 520). Through the culture that impacted Wilson Harris's writing, the idea of unity between life and death further provides insights on how life and death are portrayed in *Ascent to Omai*.

Another theme that Mexican folk culture presents, the idea of cycles, further supports the idea that life and death does not oppose, but rather endorse each other. In *Ascent to Omai*, the idea of cycle is present throughout, especially

the cycle of time. There are a lot of references of the idea of forty years such as "in forty years", "forty years ago", and "forty years later" (Harris, "Ascent" 47, 55, 62); Wilson Harris explains that "his choice of forty years was a symbolic equivalent to the Mexican cycle of fifty-two years" (Harris, "Ascent" 90 - 91). In Mexican folk culture, time was similarly "a never-ending succession of cycles" (Kelly 517). Similarly, the relationship between life and death are also cyclic. Life is "often referred to as a dream, a fiction" in Mexican folk culture, and death is "rather conceived of as requisite to the prolongation of life" (Kelly 517). Life and death are connected in the sense that death is needed for life rather than "a definitive end" (Kelly 518): they need each other for one to follow another. Life and death thus become cyclic and are followed by one another, as "death precedes life, which in turn must again be succeeded by death in a never-ending stream" (Kelly 518). Therefore, death here represents a start of life rather than an end of life, and they are functioning together to create this cycle rather than opposing one another.

Not only does death not mean an opposition or an end of life, it also does not represent an end of communion between the living and the dead. In this novel, the means of communion between the two worlds are ghosts. In *Ascent to Omai*, Victor's father Adam occurs throughout the novela in the form of a ghost accompanying his son's journey (Harris, "Ascent"). The ghost carries the responsibility of communion between the living, Victor, and the dead, Adam. At the beginning of Book II in the novela, Wilson Harris included a quote from Gerald Moore saying that "[since] the dead are concerned with the living, the initiative for communication comes as often from them as from their descendents" (Harris, "Ascent" 49); ghosts are initiating communion between the living and the dead. At the beginning of the novela, Victor follows the guide of "[the] ruined figure" up the hill and later on communicates with "[his] secret companion" (Harris, "Ascent" 25, 27). This ghost was a "doppelgänger" and "had made a fortune in the gold and diamond fields of the interior but had lost everything in the end" just like Victor (Harris, "Ascent" 26); besides Victor himself, Adam was a porkknocker who lost all his fortunes, which implies the identity of the ghost being Adam. According to Wilson Harris, ghosts play an important role in literature, and their "multi-faceted disguises include hunger as a driving force in the adventures of ancient and modern civilisations" (Harris, "The Fabric" 182). Victor is on a journey, an adventure, and that explains the "hunger" of the ghost of Adam in this adventure. With hunger, the dead will never be dead, but rather pursue the communion with the living in the form of ghosts. Thus, death does not mean the end of the communion between life and death.

What death is, on the other hand, is the start of a new understanding, a new self, and an enlightenment. Those qualities are reflected through near-death experiences (Akoma) or before-death experiences (Adler). In *Ascent to Omai*, Victor experiences the death of Child One, Child Two and Child Three: all the near-death experiences he had (Harris, "Ascent" 103-104, 130). After the death of Child One, which is almost getting hit by a car, Victor is

able to notice “a nothingness”, “a singing stone, something faint, voiceless”, and “[something] to do with the buried tongues of consciousness” (Harris, “Ascent” 98). After the death of Child Two, which is “the crash of a machine”, Victor was made “a man” and “an explorer”; it is also “something to free him from petticoat”, when the petticoat is the only solace from his dead mom (Harris, “Ascent” 104). After the death of Child Three, which is “the night Adam burnt bed and board”, Victor is able to blow away the housecoat, “[expunge] it of fear, of loss, of degradation, of extinction of species”, and experience the “ultimate sacrifice”, “ultimate sentence” and “ultimate forgiveness” (Harris, “Ascent” 131); he lets go of his fear and loss in the blow and experiences an enlightenment of sacrifice, sentence and forgiveness. All three deaths of the “child” provokes a new understanding, a new self. Across Wilson Harris’s work, near-death experiences represent similar themes. In Wilson Harris’s *Jonestown, Bone* “begins a series of recollections about that day and what led to it” “[sixteen] years after his near-death experience in Jonestown, and traumatized by the experience” (Akoma). Because of a near-death experience Bone begins a new understanding of the history of that day. Similar to how Victor gains a new understanding of himself through the death of Child One, Child Two, and Child Three, the near-death experiences of characters work towards a new understanding and an enlightenment.

Death is also what sparks the meaning of life (Adler). In *Ascent to Omai*, Victor starts his journey “in pursuit of the vanished constable, saint and executioner of the watershed” (Harris, “Ascent” 26), which is “his father’s ghost” (56). In other words, the death of Adam causes Victor to start his journey in pursuing his meaning of life where he learns about his life better through memories and dreams. According to a quote from *The Infinite Rehearsal* that Wilson Harris uses in *The Fabric of the Imagination*, “[life] needs death. Life needs death if it is to be. But remember it is through death that life measures itself, measures its achievements, its glories” (Harris, “The Fabric” 185). After the death of Child Three, the remnants of the housecoat “retained a living spark, a frail star, star of the Madonna” (Harris, “Ascent” 131). It is death that brings meaning to Victor and his emotion towards his parents, as the housecoat plays an important role in the family: it is the connection between Victor, and his mother, as well as the protection for Victor against his father. As the housecoat inherits meaning from death, Victor inherits meaning for his life as well. Through death, life can measure its worth and thus find its meaning. This relates to the cyclic relationship between life and death: in order for life to roll forward and have a meaning, death is the pre-exquisite, the concept that gives life its significance.

Death not only sparks the meaning of life, it can become life. In *Ascent to Omai*, Wilson Harris draws a parallel between “the sense of a multiplication of deaths” and “the sense of having been part and parcel of an event akin to being born” -- between the sensations of death and life (Harris, “Ascent” 100). This parallel provides insights to a direct relationship between death and life and that

sensually they are akin to one another. According to Akoma, this idea appears at an intuitive level, where “[the] dead are the ones who reemerge as the living” (Akoma). This idea relates again to the idea of a cycle existing in between life and death; what is different is that instead of death being the beginning of life, death is also similar to life both sensually and intuitively. The death of Child One, Two and Three provides Victor with a new sensation and inspiration that life, a new beginning, can bring. Thus, death can function as life in those two ways. Through the role of shaman in early 19th century of Caribs, Wilson Harris argues for the same connection: “[the] shaman therefore stands in a perspective wherein “death” becomes “life” (Harris, “History” 23). When death and life functions similarly, death can be in the place of life and become life.

4. CONCLUSION

Throughout the novela, death does not reflect its denotative meaning of an end of life, but rather a start. Without the deaths of Adam, Victor’s mother, or the three Childs, Victor will not be able to go on his journey of exploring himself, and will not be able to have his enlightenment or his new understanding of the world. Wilson Harris’s exposure to both indigenous and Western culture provided him with a well-rounded understanding of the importance of death. In Western ways of thinking, death is treated as a loss. People host funerals and mourn for the end of one’s life. However, in many other ancient cultures such as Mexican folk culture, “only death assured the permanence of life” (Kelly 522). In nature, “nothing ... confirms the idea of death as a definitive end” (Kelly 518), as the deaths in nature feeds all the livings. Death is also not limited by physical death; it might be spiritual death when one loses thoughts, ideas, relations, or part of their identity. But that allows new thoughts, new ideas, new relations, and new identities to fill in the blank spaces and grow a new life. Without death, there will be no life. It is important to value death as necessary and crucial.

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