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# The Hope and Possibility of Life in the Face of Each Person's Unavoidable End in Dawn Revisited by Rita Dove and When Death Comes by Mary Oliver

## The Dawn of Life and the Dusk of Death

Every living thing on this planet are guaranteed two things: life and death. The duration of one is dependent on their fate and the date of their conclusion is undisclosed; the gift of one will eventually be continued with the other. While the inevitability of the latter strikes fear to the hearts of many, most people find peace by coping with the focus on the life. In the poems "Dawn Revisited" and "When Death Comes", poets Rita Dove and Mary Oliver explore the hope and possibility of life in the face of each person's unavoidable end.

In "Dawn Revisited", poet Rita Dove parallels the beginning of a new life to the start of the day, as the title literally suggests. Her main use of imagery lies within one of the most recognizable identifier of mornings- breakfast: "in the prodigal smell of biscuits— / eggs and sausage on the grill" (Dove, 8-9) As a new morning breaks, the possibilities of new choices and life are reborn. Dove enfuses the idea of the renewal of life through imagery of a fresh start with the metaphor of "the blank page" and hopeful outlook with the idiom of "the sky's the limit": "The whole sky is yours / to write on, blown open / to a blank page." (Dove, 10-12) By the end of the poem, Dove calls on both the breakfast metaphor and the happy-go-lucky ideal: "You'll never know / who's down there, frying those eggs, / if you don't get up and see." (13-15) Dove's light-hearted narrative tone blends with the subject of hope through the descriptive calls to light.

In Mary Oliver's "When Death Comes", the title strikes the audience with the impression of the forthcoming of a dark poem, expressing the depressing inevitability of death. The humanistic fear of death is commonly associated with the fear of pain. Oliver calls to this mortal fear through the imagery of pain: the pain experienced through a death by disease— "when death comes / like the measles-pox" (Oliver, 5-6)— and the pain experienced through the a death by brute force— "When death comes / like an iceberg between the shoulder blades," (Oliver, 7-8) While Death is not literally stabbing its victims in the back with a slab of ice, the feeling of cold betrayal from life is expressed through the tactile feelings of the temperature of the weapon in the spot of vulnerability. As a way for humans to ease the inevitability of death, Death itself is commonly personified as its own being with the consciousness to take and to bargain: "when death comes and take all the bright coins from his purse / to buy me, and snaps the purse

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shut.” (Oliver, 3-4) Death as a character creates a feeling of a malicious being that stands above everyone in the hierarchy of life.

Both “Dawn Revisited” and “When Death Comes” use imagery of nature to signify life throughout, but its use differs in each poem. In “When Death Comes”, Oliver uses “the hungry bear in autumn” (2) to signify the closing of life through the season of fall, personifying Death as the hungry bear. In “Dawn Revisited”, Dove uses the imagery of “the blue jay / [hawking] his pretty wares / and the oak still [standing], spreading / his glorious shade” (2-5) to signify life of nature, and in turn the speaker, at its prime. The bright colors of the feathers of the blue jay and the leaves of the oak tree breathes the sense of life through the passage as it mimics the season of spring. The rich colors of red autumn leaves and brown fur of a bear gives the sense of death through fall.

Both poems give a sense of determination to live life to the fullest. Even when the title suggests death, “When Death Comes” is not about death itself but living life. The speaker in “When Death Comes” talks about how their fear is not about the ending of life, but rather the ending of the possibilities that they will never accomplish: “when it’s over, I don’t want to wonder / if I have made of my life something particular, and real.” (Oliver, 24-25) The speaker gives the audience the feeling of wisdom of years through their absence of fear of the unknown, but also gives the feeling of childlike-wonder through their desire to live life with joyful curiosity: “When it’s over, I want to say: all my life / I was a bride married to amazement. / I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.” (Oliver, 21-23) As Oliver writes about the curiosity of life, she approaches with the same curiosity with death: “I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering: / what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?” (9-10) Oliver leaves the audience with the parting phrase that encapsulates the speaker’s fully realized fear: “I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.” (28) Dove parallels this idea from the first line of “Dawn Revisited”: “Imagine you wake up / with a second chance” (1-2) The “revisited” aspect of the title suggests that this is a new beginning rather than the beginning of life itself as a newborn; this is a rebirth of life, which warrants a restart and a second chance. The light of new possibilities is shown through the image of literal light: “How good to rise in sunlight” (Dove, 7) As the sun rises, the promise of a new life the speaker seeks rises.

Through the use enjambment, both poets use their narrative voice as a continuation of thought to mimic the idea of the continuation of life. Death is perceived as a period on the overarching storyline of a person. The end of a line in the structure of the poem. Rita Dove and Mary Oliver, while approaching the vitality of their philosophy of life, both seek the same path as they reach the same outcome. They seek to live a life that is fearless of the ending.

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