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Justin Eberhart
College of DuPage

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Eternity

by Justin Eberhart

(English 1102)

If people put their experiences in a box, they will get different perspectives depending on the side stared at. And people's experiences cause them to react and feel in strange ways. With all the music, movies, paintings, poems, and all the other literature in the world, how is it that there are still people unfamiliar with the understanding that nothing lasts forever? Though, there are even more out there who understand this concept and yet still feel emotionally taken when such a thing happens like experiencing love and loss. Whether cognizant of it or not, this is a recurring theme in everything. "Take me or leave me; or, as is the usual order of things, both," is quoted from the poet Dorothy Parker. We can learn from that and understand that this will happen to all eventually in some point of our lives. There are 6.8 billion people in the world with different stories and experiences of their own, and yet there are so many still surprised when losing what they love. Now I'm not going to talk about how the divorce rates in the United States have skyrocketed ever since the 1970s, but on the other side of the box, there are the stories of the widowers as they proclaim their loss. In W. H. Auden's *Funeral Blues*, the narrator exclaims his loss of his lover so much that he can't see anything good to ever come again (Auden Line 16). It's about the loss of a lover and how much he meant to the narrator's life. The narrator shows his possession of his once love in the third stanza by the usage of "my" nine times:

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever:
I was wrong. (Auden 633)

This poem's theme is love lost through death but more importantly it is about love. Auden only uses the word "love" once in this poem, and his tone is simultaneously sarcastic and despairing: "I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong." The fact that "love" only becomes visible in a single instance might suggest that this topic is not of great importance to the poem. However, this is by far the most grave and deliberate line in the poem (Johnson). Auden shows the mistake that many make by their ignorance. That is the feeling of uninterrupted continuity in love. He uses sarcasm and hyperbole to illustrate how hysterical people can become with the sudden loss of love and life. In the last stanza, the narrator wants to put away all that is good such as the universe as if he were saying, "If I can't have my true love, then nobody can have theirs." The infinitude of the universe makes no sense if love, too, is not infinite and eternal; thus if one is destroyed, they both are. Since the poet does not have the power to close down the universe, perhaps he is admitting that he may be similarly powerless to declare the end of love, regardless of his sorrow (Johnson). Bitterness is how one often feels when he or she loses their lover. The narrator's love is still rumbling within his core even when his lover has gone, and he unconsciously, like anyone else, wants to feel it no more. It's funny because we see, hear, and read stories of love and loss, and yet people still are oblivious and naive in thinking that poems or stories like these are solely for entertainment. The fiction part of this poem is in the character itself and it is not to be confused with the theme. Oftentimes people get caught up in a story. Thinking just because it is fiction, they forget there is a message to be learned. The poet for *Funeral Blues* clearly states his message, which is love does not last forever. As children, *experience* is what teaches us the meaning of many concepts, such as "wet" and "dry"

(American School). This way of learning hasn't ceased as we grew older. Things are easier to remember when we think of an example not only through our own experiences but also from the lives of others. When you look up a word in the dictionary, you will have the definition, but more importantly you will have several sentences with the usage of the word as examples to help you conjure up an image and hopefully understand its meaning. Perhaps this is why when people read poetry you may hear different perspectives about what the poem means. Each word strikes up subtle differences in certain images and feelings to each individual by their own experiences. So this is why people are oblivious, as they never have experienced love lost. For one cannot see without first being able to feel. *How do I love thee? Let me count the ways* is a sonnet written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning "to her husband-to-be, poet Robert Browning" (Soylent). When one reads this poem, it is obvious that we see it is about her intense love for him, but other meanings in this poem are often times over looked by a reader with a lack of experience through this kind of field which is love. In lines 9-13, Elizabeth Browning talks about a common theme in life which she has come to know early in her life which is love lost, but this time with love regained:

I love thee with the passion put to use in my old griefs, and with my childhood's
faith. I love thee with a love I seemed to lose With my saints,— I love thee with the
breath, Smiles, tears, of all my life!. (Browning 721)

Before she wrote this poem, "she underwent the greatest grief of her life by the drowning of her beloved brother, who with two friends went sailing in a small boat" (Soylent). The word, "passion," means an intense desire and a strong emotion, and she had this feeling ever since her childhood, as her younger sister also died when Browning was only 8. Browning nows feels that she is able to transfer her fervent desire towards her lover. [Browning is] describing the intensity of her love with a passion normally reserved for those who are grieving the loss of loved ones, or perhaps the loss of her own vitality, as she was an invalid by the time she wrote these lines. (Anonymous) Browning fully comprehends the inevitability of love lost as a result of the deaths of her siblings, and so she doesn't take her love for Robert Browning for granted:

Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after
death. (Browning 721, Lines 13-14)

Browning hopes that their love will thrive and become more prominent after death, but of course she isn't sure. All she knows is through her own experience she was able to feel great pain and love for her closest brother after he died. Perhaps, Elizabeth's love for Robert will be even greater after they die. "Ever has it been that love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation," –Kahlil Gibran. If ever there is doubt about it, just listen to Chopin's Ballade in G minor for an example. The most poignant is the chord only because of the chord it follows. We can't begin to fathom the beauty that derives from happiness and love without anything to measure it with. In 1842, Alfred Tennyson published a poem, *The Lady of Shalott*, and it takes place during the Arthurian times. The Lady of Shalott secludes herself within a tower as she weaves "a magic web with colours gay" (Line 38), for she knows that she will be cursed if she mingles within the world, "so instead she watches what happens outside only indirectly, in a mirror" (Szany 240).

Only reapers, reaping early In among the bearded barley, Hear a song that echoes cheerly from the river winding clearly, Down to tower'd Camelot: And by the moon the reaper weary, Piling sheaves in uplands airy, Listening, whispers "'Tis the fairy Lady of Shalott" (Tennyson Lines 28-36).

The Lady is an artist who is known outside only by the echo of her quiet song, and just "like an artist, she observes the world, and describes it, but does not participate in it" (Szany 240). In part

3 of the poem, Sir Lancelot is seen through her mirror as he sang “Tirra Lirra” (Tennyson Line 107) and so she left:

She left the web, she left the loom, She made three paces thro’ the room, She saw the water-lily bloom, She saw the helmet and the plume, She look’d down to Camelot. Out flew the web and floated wide; The mirror crack’d from side to side; “The curse is come upon me,” cried The Lady of Shalott. (Tennyson Lines 109-117)

The Lady expressed her frustrations in Part 2 for only seeing the world--lovers courting, knights riding, funerals--in shadows (Szany 241). She saw the beauty in the world and fell in love with it so much that she couldn’t stand aside any longer. She realized that when she came down from her tower, she was slowly dying just as if she turned away from her own immortality to be one with the world. As she drifted along a boat towards Camelot, she wrote her name on it and sang her last song. Alfred, Lord Tennyson may be suggesting that in his poem a poet needs to function by some degree of isolation, so that his art may still have that mystique needed for creation: ...he felt an obligation to seek subject matter outside the world of his own mind and his own immediate experiences--to comment on politics, history, or a more general humanity--he also feared that this expansion into broader territories might destroy his poetry’s magic (*SparkNotes* Editors). A painter and a poet observe the world so they can try to capture the beauty, and through their experiences, each one of them sees something different. Hence the reason how they convey the world clearly in a new light for us to see. Tennyson isn’t alone, and in fact, what he suggests in his poem is universal amongst artists. Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 and is considered to be amongst the greatest of the American poets, but she didn’t receive any acclaim during her lifetime as her poetry wasn’t published until after her death. Just like the Lady of Shalott, Dickinson merely observed the world: Living a life of simplicity and seclusion, she yet wrote poetry of great power; questioning the nature of immortality and death, with at times an almost mantric quality. Her different lifestyle created an aura; often romanticized, and frequently a source of interest and speculation. (Pettinger) In the poem, *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, Dickinson personifies death as her fiancé:

The Dews drew quivering and chill--For only Gossamer, my Gown My Tippet--only Tulle-- (Dickinson Lines 14-16)

She embraces death as a beginning rather than an end, but not without reflecting on the beauty of the life she lived:

We passed the school, where Children stroveAt Recess--in the Ring--We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain--We Passed the Setting Sun-- (Dickinson Lines 9-12)

She uses symbols like the school to represent her childhood, and the fields of ripe grain to represent the midday of life and the working years. *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* suggests that she was too busy to even think about death until it came by:

He Kindly stopped for me--The Carriage held but just Ourselves--And Immortality-- (Dickinson Lines 2-4)

Death stopped for her to show her the little joys in life, and Immortality was also present, because Emily Dickinson believed that through death brings immortality. She saw a fleeting life which allowed her to enjoy the times she was in. She put away her labor and leisure for Death’s civility (Dickinson Lines 6-8) which means, because nothing lasts forever, she didn’t want to waste

her time missing out in the delicacies that surround her. As she had shown throughout in all her poetry, she understood a transient world. The only thing that is eternal is the fact that no matter how much we gain, we also lose. We must know tis' only life, and the sooner we realize that, the wiser we become and lose that innocence/ignorance. In "A Dream Within A Dream," Edgar Allan Poe writes:

And I hold within my hand Grains of the golden sand-How few! yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep, While I weep- while I weep! O God! can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?

These stories merely prophesy what is to become of all. Clutching hard with our fists only allows us to lose even more. This is not to warn people, but rather to give understanding so *when* we experience our own losses, we may still smile and keep on going. Love, fear, grief, and hope are essential for experiencing the journey of life, which is a dirt road unmarked by footprints of many. We must let go! If humanity were put in a box, you would get different perspectives, depending upon which side the individual sees. Humanity is made up of many beautiful things, events and people, and beauty is measured by subconsciously knowing that all things evaporate eventually. And that repetitious trait in every song is its ending.

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