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Author(s)	K.O. Anderson
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Evanescence

Kenneth O. Anderson

Abstract

This paper explores the theme of evanescence in poetry and pop lyrics. It looks at metaphors for the brevity of life, our sense of loss, and isolation. It concludes with thoughts by Rilke on solitude and how one can connect with others.

Key words; evanescence, mortality, isolation, missed connections, solitude, acceptance

“All humanity is grass and all its beauty is like the wild flower’s. The grass withers, the flower fades.” (Isaiah 40: 6-8, *The New Jerusalem Bible*).

Life is evanescent. This fact can be felt in all poetry. Poets write poems in part so that something of themselves will continue to exist after they themselves are gone, but this kind of immortality is little or no consolation for not being there oneself: “When I have fears that I may cease to be,” Keats said, “. . . then on the shore/Of the wide world I stand alone, and think/Till love and fame to nothingness do sink” (Keats, 225-6). For “[g]olden lads and girls all must,/As chimney-sweepers, come to dust” (Shakespeare, 1320).

Poets have often used the Biblical image of flowers as a metaphor representing human mortality, for example, Robert Herrick’s (Herrick 277) “To Daffodils”:

Fair Daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon;
As yet the early-rising sun
Has not attain’d his noon.
Stay, stay,
Until the hasting day
Has run
But to the even-song;
And, having pray’d together, we
Will go with you along.

We have short time to stay, as you,
We have as short a spring ;
As quick a growth to meet decay,
As you, or anything.
We die
As your hours do, and dry
Away,
Like to the summer's rain ;
Or as the pearls of morning's dew,
Ne'er to be found again.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (Hopkins 1844-1889) tells a young girl named Margaret that, in mourning the death of a flower, she is really mourning her own future death :

Spring and Fall :
to a Young Child

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie ;
And yet you *will* weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name :
Sorrow's springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What héart héard of, ghóst guéssed :
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

Shakespeare uses the metaphor of the end of a play to represent the end of life itself, in Act 4, Scene 1, of *The Tempest* :

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
 As I foretold you, were all spirits and
 Are melted into air, into thin air :
 And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
 The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
 Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
 And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
 Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
 As dreams are made on, and our little life
 Is rounded with a sleep (Shakespeare 1390-1).

Some may be able to “go gentle into that good night”, due to having strong religious faith or the serenity which comes from having done all that one set out to do before reaching a ripe old age, but many people feel, if not the rage Dylan Thomas (Thomas 159) urged his father to feel “against the dying of the light”, at least trepidation, a *frisson*, or even outright terror at the thought of the end of life. It is the thought of all that one has left undone, or done badly, or can do nothing to change or atone for at a late hour (John Greenleaf Whittier: “For all sad words of tongue or pen,/The saddest are these: ‘It might have been!’”) (“Maud Muller”).

Sometimes we are able to forget the pressure of time and live in a timeless moment. But this moment cannot be sustained for long, and the sense of loss one feels at the transience of all things, all people, returns. Paul Simon expresses this simply but powerfully in “Leaves That Are Green” (Simon 13) :

I was twenty-one years when I wrote this song
 I'm twenty-two now, but I won't be for long
 Time hurries on
 And the leaves that are green turn to brown
 And they wither with the wind
 And they crumble in your hand. . .
 Hello, Hello, Hello, Hello,
 Good-bye, Good-bye
 Good-bye, Good-bye
 That's all there is
 And the leaves that are green turn to brown

Ezra Pound (Pound 35) expressed the evanescence of human life in a short poem influenced by haiku, “In a Station of the Metro”: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd ;/petals on a wet, black bough.” James Reeves (Reeves 29) wrote “In Less Than Seconds”, “I look into their beautiful passing faces./In less than seconds worlds have swum apart.” Here there is not only expression of the fleeting quality of human life, but also a sense of loss at the lack of connection, a feeling of loneliness and isolation.

Both poetry and pop music (as Noel Coward wrote in his play *Private Lives*, “Extraordinary how potent cheap music is”) express the pathos of love found and immediately lost. Take, for example, Douglas Dunn’s “The Worst of All Loves” (Dunn 37) :

Where do they go, the faces, the people seen
In glances and longed for, who smile back
Wondering where the next kiss is coming from?

They are seen suddenly, from the top decks of buses,
On railway platforms at the tea machine,
When the sleep of traveling makes us look for them.

A whiff of perfume, an eye, a hat, a shoe,
Bring back vague memories of names,
Thinggummy, that bloke, what’s her name.

What great thing have I lost, that faces in a crowd
Should make me look at them for one I know,
What are faces that they must be looked for?

But there’s one face, seen only once,
A fragment of a crowd. I know enough of her.
That face makes me dissatisfied with myself.

Those we secretly love, who never know of us,
What happens to them? Only this is known :
They will never meet us suddenly in pleasant rooms.

Dunn's line "Vague memories of names,/Thingummy, that bloke, what's her name" (or, in pop song parlance, "My old flame/Can't even remember her name") finds an echo in Daniel Langton's "Popcorn" (Langton 32) :

We have moved too much, traveled too much,
My head is a hive of old numbers,
Juniper seven something something seven something,
The stocking caught on the phone,
The desperate one by one of the lies.

Garfield something, 9023.
Klondike 5, whazzit whazzit ten.
Your phone spelled DANGERS,
Your phone spelled KLAAXI,
Your phone spelled love once,
Something something once.

Compare Dunn's poem to the pop song "The People That You Never Get to Love" by Rupert Holmes :

You're browsing through a second hand bookstore
And you see her in non-fiction V through Y
She looks up from World War Two
And then you catch her catching you catching her eye.
And you quickly turn away your wishful stare
And take a sudden interest in your shoes
If you only had the courage, but you don't
She turns and leaves and you both lose.

And you think about
The people that you never get to love.
It's not as if you even have the chance.
So many worth a second life
But rarely do you get a second glance
Until fate cuts in on your dance.

And you'll see her on a train that you've just missed.
At a bus stop where your bus will never stop.
Or in a passing Buick when you've been pulled over by a traffic cop.
Or you'll share an elevator, just you two
And you'll rise in solemn silence to your floor.
Like the fool you are you get off
And she leaves your life behind a closing door.

And you think about
The people that you never get to love
The poem you intended to begin
The saddest words that anyone has ever said
Are "Lord what might have been"
But no-one said you get to win.

Still you're never gonna miss what you don't know
And you don't know who you'll meet at half past three
It could be a total stranger who looks something just exactly much like me.

One of the people that you never get to love
One of the people that you never get to love
The people that you never get to love.

One notes the echo of Whittier, while "she leaves your life behind a closing door" reminds one of the British film *Sliding Doors* (1998). "Love", it seems, "your magic spell is everywhere"—and so are missed connections, missed chances, and the sense of loss and the pathos of the evanescence of life.

But even when one finds a person one wants to spend one's life with, difficulties posed by selfishness and misunderstanding remain. That so many marriages end in divorce attests to these difficulties. Having children can exacerbate the difficulties. Rilke wrote (Rilke 57-8) that

A good marriage is that in which each appoints the other guardian of his solitude . . . once the realization is accepted that even between the *closest* human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole and against a wide sky!

It is in accepting this solitude in oneself and in the other, and in caring about the other as much as oneself, that one can begin to accept the evanescence of life and become absorbed in the moment rather than becoming obsessed with the past or the passing of time. This love can reverberate as a stone cast into a pool causes water to reverberate. The reverberations continue after one's own existence comes to an end, and this may of some consolation for us when we consider our own mortality. The good we do is continued in the lives of those who live after we are gone.

Such acceptance, such love, does not come easily, but only through dedication and determination. Rilke, acknowledging the difficulty, nevertheless says, that it can be achieved (Rilke 41-43) :

But everything that may someday be possible for many people, the solitary man can now, already, prepare and build with his own hands, which make fewer mistakes. Therefore, dear Sir, love your solitude and try to sing out with the pain it causes you. For those who are near you are far away, you write, and this shows that the space around you is beginning to grow vast. And if what is near you is far away, then your vastness is already among the stars and is very great ; be happy about your growth, in which of course you can't take anyone with you, and be gentle with those who stay behind ; be confident and calm in front of them and don't torment them with your doubts and don't frighten them with your faith or joy, which they wouldn't be able to comprehend. Seek out some simple and true feeling of what you have in common with them, which doesn't necessarily have to alter when you yourself change again and again ; when you see them, love life in a form that is not your own and be indulgent toward those who are growing old, who are afraid of the aloneness that you trust. Avoid providing material for the drama, that is always stretched tight between parent and children ; it uses up much of the children's strength and wastes the love of the elders, which acts and warms even if it doesn't comprehend. Don't ask for any advice from them and don't expect any understanding ; but believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance, and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it.

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はかなさ

アンダスン ケネス

抄 録

本稿は、詩およびポピュラー音楽の歌詞に表現される主題としての「はかなさ」について考察するものである。具体的には「束の間の人生」(the brevity of life) や、われわれ人間の「喪失感」(a sense of loss) や「孤独」(isolation) の比喩的表現として「はかなさ」という主題が用いられてきた点に注目し、詩人リルケの「幽所」(solitude) および「他者との関係性の構築」をめぐる考え方に示唆を得ながら「はかなさ」という主題が詩やポピュラー音楽の歌詞においてどのように取り扱われ、表現されてきたのか検討する。

キーワード； はかなさ， 死， 孤独， 損なわれた関係性， 幽所， 容認・信頼